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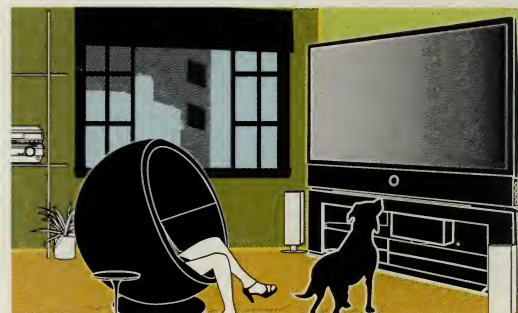
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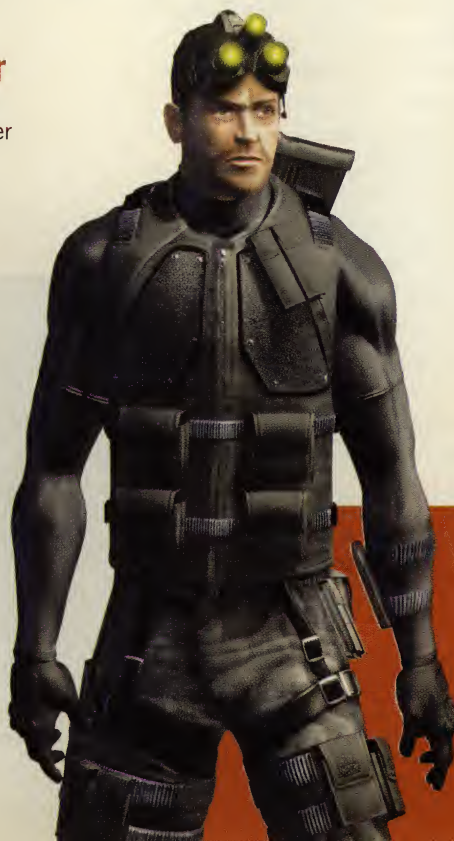
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The New Mainstream

As you have probably noticed, gaming has grown up a lot recently, going from a small basement hobby into a movement powerful enough to compete with television and film. Gaming has become so big that we now count mainstream celebrities the likes of Michael Vick, David Cross, and RZA amongst our ranks.

Hollywood has taken notice, and big-budget games now feature A-list talent to help create more visceral interactive experiences (see our Starcade feature on page 70) for the growing audiences. With over 145 million Americans of all races, genders, and social backgrounds spending their free time behind game controllers, a new portrait of the American gamer is emerging.

We started *SURGE* to explore this movement with the intelligence and maturity it deserves. By providing in-depth, behind-the-scenes coverage and articulate, down-to-earth criticism on industry trends, *SURGE* is in a unique position to address the legitimacy of interactive entertainment for those of us who have grown up with the movement and for those interested in learning what all the rage is about.

The numbers are behind us. The average gamer is now 29 years old with a social life and salary to boot, and most of us have been playing games throughout our adolescence and into adulthood. It's no coincidence that primetime television ratings for shows geared toward 18-34-year-old males are dwindling while PC and console software sales continue to grow. While the film and television industries have hit a wall creatively, the graphics technology and forms of interactive storytelling in videogames continue to change for the better. With the mobile and online markets signaling growth with products and services like Sony's PSP and Microsoft's Xbox Live, there's no indication of the industry peaking anytime soon.

As interactive entertainment continues to grow more mainstream, it's only a matter of time before we're sitting with our morning cups of coffee reading a review of the latest *GTA* in *The New York Times* Sunday edition. It's a good time to be a gamer.

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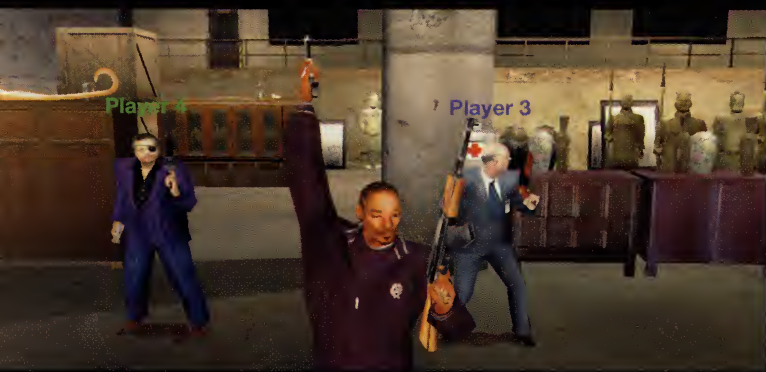
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Last issue, we posed the questions that were on our minds, and you kindly responded with your take on the situation. Some of you raised valid, thought-provoking points, while others simply reminded us why fanboys need to be taken with a grain of salt. You should be ashamed.

A LEAKY VALVE? TAMING THE BEAST

I feel that Valve was starting to choke on the huge bite that it took. Maybe they realized that a lot of people couldn't afford the high-end monster computers needed to run their program (with all the bells and whistles) smoothly. I don't mean to jump to conclusions, but wasn't there some controversy over the graphics cards just prior to the so-called hacker situation? Would this security breach affect the development for the console version also? Anyhow, if it takes more time to put out an awesome game, so be it. I just hope my computer can handle the BEAST that is *Half-Life 2*!

P.S. Cool magazine, I am looking forward to future issues.

—Badius

SHOULD NINTENDO PULL A SEGA? THE COLD, HARD TRUTH

I am an old-school Nintendo fan. Allow me to rephrase that: I am a fan of old-school Nintendo. This new stuff is embarrassing for whoever is a Nintendo fan. It started with Nintendo 64—after *007* and *Perfect Dark*, you were left with jack to play. I understand those are two amazing games (and the only reason I still have a 64). However, you need a LOT more than two great games to hold your own these days.

And the GameCube...that is just sad. You need a third arm to operate it correctly, and the games are sad at best. The only two saving graces of the GameCube are *Metroid Prime* and *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, but in my mind, they are not what you call platinum hits.

It is sad to say, but Nintendo better pack it up with the console part of their business while there is still something left of the company to pack up. I am optimistic that they can pull off some great games if that is all they concern themselves with.

Still don't agree? Two words: Virtual Boy. Sorry if I offend anyone, but as my grandfather says: the truth hurts.

—Computer Geek 110

BEAT THEM AT THEIR OWN GAME

I have been a loyal Nintendo-ite for ten years. However, even I can see that Nintendo needs a complete overhaul with its next system, or they may go the way of the dodo (or Sega, whichever is easiest). My solution? Do what every other company seems



VAPORWARE, ANYONE?

Several new companies have or are debuting new systems lately: the Nokia N-Gage, Tapwave Zodiac, Infinium Labs Phantom, and the DISCover ApeXtreme. Which, if any, of these systems do you think is here to stay? Do you think the market has room for some of these smaller companies to compete?

HANG THE DJ

Over the past few years, unassuming game scores have been replaced with licensed soundtracks from many of the "hot acts" in the music industry, past and present. Though music soundtracks have been integrated beautifully into games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, many developers simply feature the songs in the game menus. Are you in favor of publishers assuming the musical tastes of game players? EA Traks, we're looking at you...

PROFESSIONAL GAMING: Dream or Reality?

With the emergence of groups like Cyberathlete Professional League, Major League Gaming, and Cyber X Gaming, it seems pro gaming is growing into a viable market. Do you think this is a worthy development or just a pipe dream for enthusiasts hoping to make their hobby a job? Do you think professional gaming will ever become a spectator "sport"?

Do you have an opinion on these hot topics or on *SURGE*? Please write to letters@surgemag.com.

CORRECTION: Last issue we neglected to credit Tom Ham for authoring the Rigs column. Our apologies to Tombo.



This is my one hope, for in unity will we best be armed
to repel the tide of advancing evil.

Elias Tryton, Year 2525.

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to be doing right now: Take someone else's good ideas, improve upon them, then call them your own.

It's a perfect strategy; it has to be, or why else would every other company be doing it? Sony is making a tricked-out PlayStation, the PSX, with more bells and whistles in it than Xbox and Ludacris' Escalade combined.

Gateway is copying Alienware with its newest gaming computer (they basically took an Alienware computer and spray painted it blue), and I'm sure there are countless other examples out there that I was too lazy to find out about.

So who or what should Nintendo copy in its attempt to create a console that sells? Everybody. That's right, Nintendo should make the all-encompassing videogame console. The new system should be sleek and sexy like an Alienware computer, and have more gadgets than Xbox and PSX combined (can anyone say fondue?). It should be heavier than Jared before he started going to Subway. (The lightweight approach doesn't work when it comes to videogame consoles. Apparently bigger is better.) And finally, the most important thing Nintendo has to do to ensure better sales: Never, EVER, EVER make another game that requires or is greatly enhanced by connecting to a Game Boy Advance. It's just stupid.

—Adrian Fiddes

We would love to see Nintendo make a bold move toward the Sony and Microsoft markets (competition only means better games all around), but it may be tough for Nintendo to secure the technological backing that the two giants can afford with their deep pockets. While Nintendo is in no way hurting financially, it may be tough for it to match S&M (he he) with all the convergence technology like wireless networking, hard drive, MP3, and video support that we expect in the next generation.

KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON

Hey you guys, great magazine. It looks cool and has great stuff in it, but on to the question at hand: Should Nintendo pull a Sega? My answer is no, for several reasons.

One, they are still a great company, and just because they have made a few mistakes does not mean that they should pull out of the console business. They still make great games like *Pikmin*, *Zelda*, and *Mario*, just to name a few.

Two, they can still make up for their past mistakes. Many people have complained that GameCube is a kids' system. Nintendo is now realizing this and doing things to correct this mistake (i.e., *MGS: The Twin Snakes*, *Resident Evil*, and probably more in the future).

Three, look to the future. Nintendo is learning from its mistakes and can make up for these with its next console (handheld or otherwise). Nintendo is still a company with a lot of potential. Plus, I seem to remember a quote from Nintendo's president saying that when Nintendo gets out of making games is when Nintendo leaves the game business forever.

—Jhon Doe

"IT IS SAD TO SAY, BUT NINTENDO BETTER PACK IT UP WITH THE CONSOLE PART OF THEIR BUSINESS WHILE THERE IS STILL SOMETHING LEFT OF THE COMPANY TO PACK UP."

JUST BUY THE DAMN THING

I saw your section in *SURGE*'s premiere issue asking if Nintendo should "pull a Sega" and let Mario travel to the other systems. I say, No way! If you folks want *Zelda*, *Mario*, and *Star Fox*, just fork over the new low price and get a GameCube. I REALLY don't want to see Nintendo sacrifice its great, EXCLUSIVE game series.

—Shadow

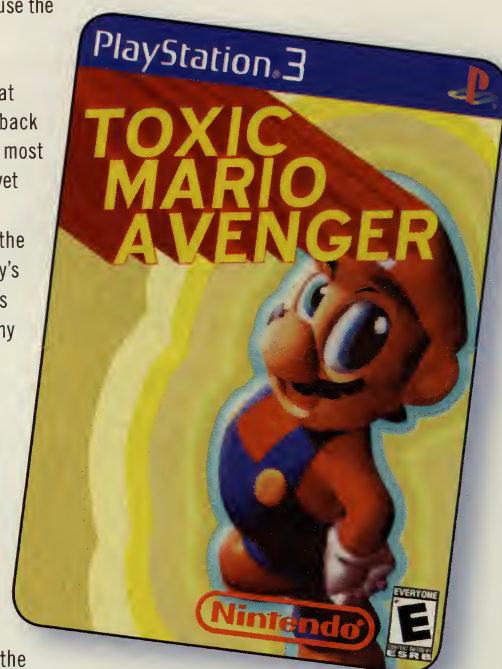
Good point. It will only set you back \$100.

STICK WITH THE FACTS

GameCube is technologically superior to the PlayStation 2, and for some cross-platform titles, it just looks and works better than the Xbox version. And financially, Nintendo isn't broke yet. Microsoft is only in the game in the US—and only due to their deep pockets. Society at large should be ashamed for allowing the weak Sony offering of PlayStation 2 to take the top seat. (And I'll grumble some more about having to use the horribly stupid multitap device.)

I'm rather certain that Sony's PSP isn't going to amount to much, and that Nintendo's next offering will get them back on top. Of course, online play is where most people say Nintendo is weak, but I've yet to have an online play experience that was enjoyable. I feel that Xbox Live is the way to go, but it is way too pricey. Sony's not having a central hub certainly does keep the price down, but I've seen many complaints about trying to hook up online.

Nintendo has the best-selling system right now (Game Boy Advance/GBA SP) and the third best selling worldwide (GameCube), and there doesn't look to be much stopping them. I will have to agree that [Shigeru] Miyamoto's fascination with GBA-to-GameCube hookup is getting very stale, but a few items on the horizon might convince me otherwise (notably *Zelda: Four*

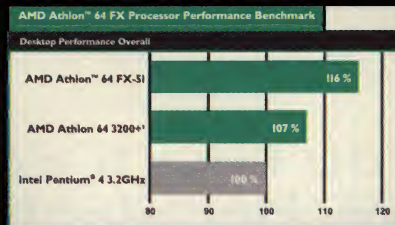




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Swords and Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles).

That being said, I will continue to give *SURGE* the benefit of the doubt and give your premiere issue a good reading. You can certainly retract your statements in the future, when Nintendo rules them all.

—David Kearns

Come on, David, you've never had an enjoyable online experience? Turn your back to the cave wall and face the world! With the fabulous Xbox Live, PS2, and PC online offerings, the multiplayer experience is entering its heyday. Strap on a strap-on and jump in!

As far as your Nintendo comments, we think the developers would argue against your claim that the Nintendo is technologically superior to the PS2, regardless of its better graphics chip, for one reason: DVD. The massive storage of a DVD disc is tremendously attractive to developers, as they can draw environments directly from the discs to create bigger and better worlds. This is one of the big reasons why many of the multiconsole titles are appearing on the Xbox and PS2, but not the GC these days. As of this year, the GC will be the only console without a developed online presence or a hard drive.

YOU GUYS RULE

I am a 35-year-old gamer/law student. While going through my monthly ritual of finding all the new console and PC game mags, I stumbled across *SURGE*'s first issue. I have NEVER written to a magazine on any issue, so you have the good or bad luck of getting the first!

I am so impressed with the magazine! Instead of aiming it at salivating, hormone-raging teens, it was readable cover to cover and appealed to the growing masses of gamers with an IQ over the 100 mark. I cannot emphasize how refreshing it was to read about games from an intelligent perspective instead of the road that mags like *EGM* and the rest have gone down—they seem to only be writing about how many breasts are in the game and assume that everyone is a master gamer.

Trying to get my wife involved in gaming, even just doing a co-op through *Halo* or *Return of the King* with me, has been an event that has been impossible until now. I keep telling her that the stats show that the playing field is evening out—women are playing games, too. Then she sees my magazines and thinks I'm full of crap. However, after showing her your tactful and intelligent magazine, she has

agreed to try playing a few games with me.

Thanks for that, and thanks for putting out a magazine that I will subscribe to as soon as I can.

—David Kaufman

Thanks David. Let us know how getting your wife to play games goes. We all know that can be one tough sell.

INTELLIGENT DESIGN

I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your magazine. I've read most of the other PC and console mags out there, and *SURGE* seems to have the best layout. I like the way you have the tech info toward the front, where I'm most likely to read it. Most periodicals have hardware info tucked away in the back, where, by the time I get to it, I don't care anymore.

I don't care what five games each editor is playing, and if I want to see nice racks I'll buy *Maxim* or some other source of wacking material, or I'll rent a DVD of the *Spike TV Video Game Awards* if I get really desperate. Please continue in the excellent vein you've started in, and look forward to many intelligent adult gamers subscribing to your magazine. Thank you for your time, and continued good luck.

—Erik Oliver

KILL THE RATING SYSTEM

I was at QFC the other day and noticed a new magazine, *SURGE*, on the rack. I saw an interesting article comparing the N-Gage and the Zodiac, so I bought it. This is a new magazine, and I understand that you haven't had time to learn from your own mistakes, but I have some suggestions for what could hopefully make your magazine much better.

The one thing that really bothers me is your reviews. Your reviews are different from those of other magazines. The breakdown makes sense to me, but the second rating does not. I prefer a rating that shows how much the reviewer liked the game instead of telling you whether or not to buy it.

Also, only five possible scores aren't enough. Didn't 14 games score a four out of five? If the scores were like a report card (A+, A, A-, etc.), that would be much better. Or, you could score games like *EGM* does (10,9.5,9,8.5,etc). Just make sure that the highest score is rarely, if ever, given out. If you have enough reviewers, you could get multiple reviews on each game and give your readers a few different points of view. I do like *The Executioner*, though.

One thing I really like about your magazine is the focus on new hardware (N-Gage, Zodiac, new Game Boy wireless link, PCs, etc.). Good luck.

—Jesse

Yeah, our review scores were kind of wack, so we cut our losses and are going with a shiny new ten-point system. Screw the decimals though; what's the true difference between games rated 4.2 and 4.4? Smart asses will say ".2," but what does that mean?

Out with the old...



...and in with the new.

Rating
9
10

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C-ycho-Level Gaming

Electric shock, apocalyptic death cults, guys in rooster suits: the future of gaming?

Down in a rank basement somewhere in California, two guys in chicken suits bounce, wriggle, and writhe while studying their moves on a video monitor. No, this isn't a Plushie porn shoot, it's art. Competitive performance art. The chicken suits—rooster suits, really—are custom-made game controllers, and these warriors are throwing down in *Cockfight Arena*, an interactive gaming experience created by C-level, a San Francisco-based collective of artists, programmers, and artist/programmers with a very singular view of gaming and art. The players' real-life movements correspond to the flaps and pecks of their "avatars" (their word, not ours) featured in the game, which looks like a psychedelia-infused *Joust* for the 21st century. Meanwhile, sweaty spectators swig beer and place bets on their favorite, er, cock.

"[It's] hot, loud, and intense," says C-level, which communicates, via e-mail only, as a collective unit, sort of like a well-intentioned Borg. "Imagine 100 people crammed into a basement with a seven-foot ceiling gambling, cheering, and drinking," he/she/it adds. Pretty sweet—not to mention the kitsch factor played to maximum effect: "We decided it would be great to see if we could get [the players] to act aggressively while wearing bird suits." It's just like a real cockfight, except no actual avian violence is perpetrated in these smackdowns.

People *do* get hurt in C-Level's other, nastier game, *Tekken Torture Tournament*, in which players strap electrodes to their arms and play Namco's classic fighter for PlayStation. As the game's characters duke it out and suffer in-game injury, (you guessed it) the players are shocked. It's all about the physical link between game and player—just like in *Cockfight*. "We saw this as a rich way to articulate the relations between the person who plays the game and the avatar that stands in for them and the complex process of identification that occurs when you play a game as someone or something other than yourself," writes C-level.

Clearly, these aren't your typical game designers. Focusing on the deeper, psycho-sociological aspects of gameplay, C-level seeks to take gaming to its highest form by bringing competitors down to their basest levels. "[During our] performative spectacles of aggression, people act like larger-than-life figures, or act out an atavistic fantasy of being a gladiator." Riiiiiiight.

Then there's C-level's third-person shooter, *Waco Resurrection*, the first chapter of the group's apocalyptic *Endgame* trilogy, which will explore alternative realities based on historical events. In *WR*, you play as David Koresh during the notorious Branch Davidian standoff. You take on government agents while listening to the voice of God and radiating a holy aura—this game screams realism. Subsequent chapters will feature Marshall Applewhite, the Heaven's Gate wacko, and creepy math teacher/Luddite loon Ted Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber.

Sound like fun? We think so. Look for it online later this year. As for the future of C-level, they say they will continue to reexamine historical events "with the belief that computer games provide a new and powerful lens through which one can gain a fresh perspective on historical and political issues." Definitely an intriguing concept. *Doom*, anyone?

—David Crohn



David Koresh, we hardly knew you.

Who Said Videogames Don't Incite Violence?

File under news of the weird: Robert Preston Kersey, 34, of Edgewater, Md. was arrested in November of last year after allegedly pulling a Dirty Harry on his roommates' Xbox. Apparently enraged that they were keeping him up late into the wee hours on a school night, he came into the living room and fired a single round into the offending console.

Nobody was hurt—not even the Xbox. The 9mm bullet disabled the system and ended the players' game, but did not penetrate the system. According to an Associated Press report, the single bullet grazed off the machine.

Kersey was charged with two counts of reckless endangerment (his two buddies) and destruction of private property (one gaming console) and released on bail. The Xbox remains in serious but stable condition. No word on what game they were playing.

Microsoft offered no comment on the incident.

—DC



Next-Gen Console Update

So, what's the deal with the next-gen consoles? What are they going to be called, what kind of gameplay will they offer, and, most importantly, WHEN????

To answer those oft-posed questions, let us refer you to what Sony, Microsoft, and, um, what's the other one....oh yeah, Nintendo, told us: "No friggin' comment."

Or, to be a tad more specific:



Microsoft has said that the next Xbox, very tentatively called **Xbox Next**, will include chip technology licensed from IBM. What neither Microsoft nor IBM would do, however, was offer any more details on the chip, besides saying that it's their "leading-edge semiconductor processor technology." Thanks, Mr.

Press Release. An actual warm-blooded, carbon-and-water-based spokesperson declined to offer further comment.

Two rumors have us worried that the Xbox Next may be headed in the wrong direction. First, the system may not feature compatibility with your old Xbox games. Come on, is that really too much to ask? Second, the hard drive that saved you from buying scores of those damned memory cards for your original Xbox may be 86ed in the new console. If the HD is nixed, then so too would be the downloadable content on Xbox Live, along with the ability to rip music into your games.

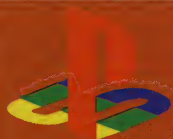
The rumor mentions something about "cutting costs." Note to Microsoft: Being the technical marvel of the bunch does count for something. You raised the bar of expectation last time; let's not level the playing field by going backward.

One analyst, P.J. McNealy from American Technology Research, has theorized that the Xbox Next would be released sometime in 2005. Again, no comment from Microsoft. Mr. McNealy prophesized that the current Xbox would go down to \$99 to compete with the Mother of All Consoles, the PS2, and to fight sagging Xsales in general.



Promiscuous IBM is also in bed with Nintendo, working on the replacement for the itty-bitty cute little baby GameCube. The new box might be called the **N5**. IBM will offer a variation of its PowerPC processor that can rock two billion operations per second. That's damned fast. One request, Nintendo:

PLEASE include a hard drive and online play with the new console. We want you to swim in the big boy's pool, but to do so, you need the right set of fins and gills.



Sony's PlayStation 2, still the top-selling console, will, someday, be superseded by the **PS3**, and then the **PS4**, and man are they gonna rule. One Sony VP went on record with an Australian newspaper saying that the

PS4 would recognize user gestures and even *emotions*. Said Phil Harrison: "future generations" of the PS will have a built-in EyeToy-like device with facial-recognition software. "If you attach very high-resolution, low-cost video cameras [to computers], you can deduce some quite interesting things about their users." Sounds cool, in a terrifying sort of way. Our US-based Sony contacts couldn't even confirm the existence of the guy, much less his statements. (Phil Harrison, we know you're out there!) Nor would they comment on the oft-circulated rumor that the PS3 will debut in 2005. Whatever. We'll all be on Mars by that time, playing PS37 with little green dudes. —DC

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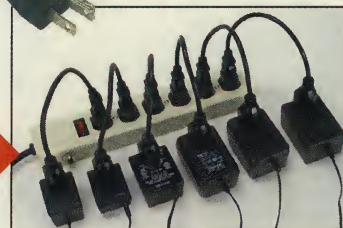
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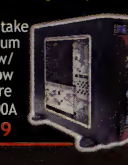
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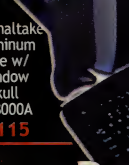
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MSI	PRO875B	\$191	865PE	\$143
Soyo	MS6728030	\$149	PT8NEOLSR	\$72
Abit	P4I875PLAT	\$181	P4VTP	\$77
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Asus	A7N8XX	\$78	A7V8XX	\$67
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Soyo	K7VMP	\$72	KT600DUPLAT	\$137
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DFI	KT400A LanParty	\$128	NFIULTRA LanParty	\$156

Processors Step 3

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Celeron	2.6 GHz 400MHz	\$102	P4	3.0GHz 512k 800	\$247
Celeron	2.7 GHz 400MHz	\$115	P4	3.2GHz 512k 800	\$311
P4	2.4GHz 512k 533	\$184	P4	2.8GHz 1Mb 800	\$202
P4	2.4GHz 512k 800	\$179	P4	3.0GHz 1Mb 800	\$247
P4	2.66GHz 512k 533	\$182	P4	3.2GHz 1Mb 800	\$311
P4	2.6GHz 512k 800	\$199	P4Extreme	3.2GHz 2Mb L3 800	\$999
P4	2.8GHz 512k 533	\$220	P4Extreme	3.4GHz 2Mb L3 800	\$1099

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Crucial	PC2700 512MB	DDR333	CT6464Z335 \$89
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Mod-ern Marvels

How one code tinkerer went from tweaking *Quake* for free to programming *Unreal Tournament 2004* as a partial owner of Epic Games.

Imagine that your normal life no longer will let you center your time around the games you love. You've got a normal, soul-crushing corporate job and a normal, adult schedule. In fact, you have so many normal things to scratch off your daily to-do list, your contact with games is now limited to spare-time entertainment. That wrenching pain in your stomach isn't an invisible dagger, but the scorching emptiness of your arid, barren future.

Don't OD on pills just yet. Instead, imagine that you've taken your sideline enjoyment of games to a new level, given something of your own creation—a self-constructed level, mission pack, or game mod—to the community, a labor of love on your part, free to whomever wants to download and play it.

Suddenly, the gesture becomes the source of ripples in your day-to-day life, and the messages of support and appreciation from gamers are soon joined by job offers from publishers outside your current career path. You didn't know it when you made your mod, but your hobby was going to end up making your life most abnormal, in a most fantastic way.

So goes the fairy-tale-come-true story of Steven Polge, the Epic programmer responsible for a number of highly anticipated titles. In 1996, his life was, by all standards, normal: He was 30, married, and employed as a computer engineer for IBM in North Carolina's tech mecca, Research Triangle Park. He consulted, created presentations, and wrote patents. For nine years he did IBM's bidding, an existence he

Steven Polge's *Quake* Reaper Bot earned him a job at Epic Games.





found comfortable, though not satisfying. It was, as he puts it, "a very corporate/bureaucratic kind of job." It wasn't what he had intended to get into when he initially joined IBM, but it offered a good career path with a future.

A fan of first-person shooters, Polge, in 1996, often retreated to the escapist challenges provided by the just-released *Quake*. Like many other gamers, he found it to be an engaging single-player experience, but he wished there was more opportunity for quality competition. The lag in non-LAN, modem-based contests made that concept a seemingly impossible dream. As it turned out, id Software offered a programming language, QuakeC, as a way for the game community to alter the boxed software with new features and gameplay modes.

"The whole concept of making mods for games was just starting," Polge says. "People made levels for *Doom* before, but with *Quake*, it was the first real opportunity to make real code changes."

So, Polge started messing with QuakeC; it gave him a creative outlet and the opportunity to do some programming again, facets sorely missing from his IBM job. Eventually, the dabbling (pushed by an interest in AI) turned into a little project he called Reaper Bot.

Money Maps

Amateur modders now have even more incentive to build those boards—\$1 million worth of incentives.

Atari, Epic, and NVIDIA teamed up to sponsor the Make Something Unreal contest, a modding competition with over \$1 million in prizes. Contestants will test their modding skills with the Unreal engine in a variety of competitions, including Best Level, Best Mod, Best Real-Time Non-interactive Movie, and Best Vehicle, among others.

The winners will be announced this March at the 2004 Game Developers Conference. Find more information at www.unrealtournament.com/ut2003/contest.php.



Reaper Bot Is Born

Reaper Bot is a *Quake* plug-in that can play the game as if it were another actual player. Reaper Bot introduced a way for enthusiasts to participate in multiplayer games without having to round up other humans. By adding this program to the *Quake* directories, the *Quake* player could inject a number of computer-controlled bots into the action with one command-line entry. The innovation quickly became the talk of the *Quake* community, not only for the concept, but also for the high-quality competition it provided. According to the ReadMe file that came with the free mod:

"It learns levels as it plays them, picks up and uses all items, [and] roams around. It understands doors, teleports, triggers, and buttons. It will jump off ledges and avoids landing in lava (understanding the gravity level). When fighting you, it picks the best weapon it has and strafes, circles, or charges. Variable skill levels are provided (skill 3 is very tough)."

Some people have imaginary friends. With the Reaper Bot, users could have all the imaginary friends they wanted—and those friends did a good job kicking real human asses at *Quake*.

As You Reap, So Shall You Sow

Polge spent only two months creating and improving Reaper Bot, an

endeavor he began just for the fun of it. However, something peculiar happened:

As more and more players took notice of Reaper Bot, game publishers and developers did, too. And with that attention came lots of job offers.

QuakeC enabled qualified enthusiasts to become garage-based game developers with *Quake* as a sturdy foundation, but as a by-product, it also became a résumé and portfolio for the best talents to prove their stuff to potential employers—intentionally or not.

In Polge's case, it was unwittingly. He says he didn't create Reaper Bot to pave a road for himself into a game-industry job. Yet, following those two months of work on this side project, he left his corporate life at IBM for good and accepted a job with Epic Games. His first project on the team was AI work and other coding for a new game called *Unreal*.

"The whole idea of being in the game industry was very new to me," he says. "It seemed a lot

less risky to not have to move, to be able to try this career out without having to make too much of a jump."

The next two years of his life are a blur to him now. He initially worked out of his North Carolina home, but the rigors of closing *Unreal* forced him to work a year at Epic's cold, faraway Canada HQ, which his wife wasn't very happy about. The sacrifices paid off: Epic promoted him to lead programmer on the next project. Originally intended as a level pack for *Unreal*, the game evolved into *Unreal Tournament*. When the company decided to relocate in 1998, it selected Raleigh, N.C., as its new home, a move that obviously pleased Polge—and his wife.

Setting Hire Standards

Flash forward to today: Polge continues to serve as lead programmer on the *Unreal Tournament* series, including *UT 2004*, and his role, as he puts it, is to "manage all the programmers and try to kind of keep everything lined up." In just over seven years, he's gone from a dabbling mod maker to lead programmer on a number of influential game projects—and he's part owner of Epic now, too.

"[Tim Sweeney, Epic's founder/president] wants a strong company, and he very clearly sees the value in wanting to make sure key people are happy and want to stay and be an important part," Polge says.

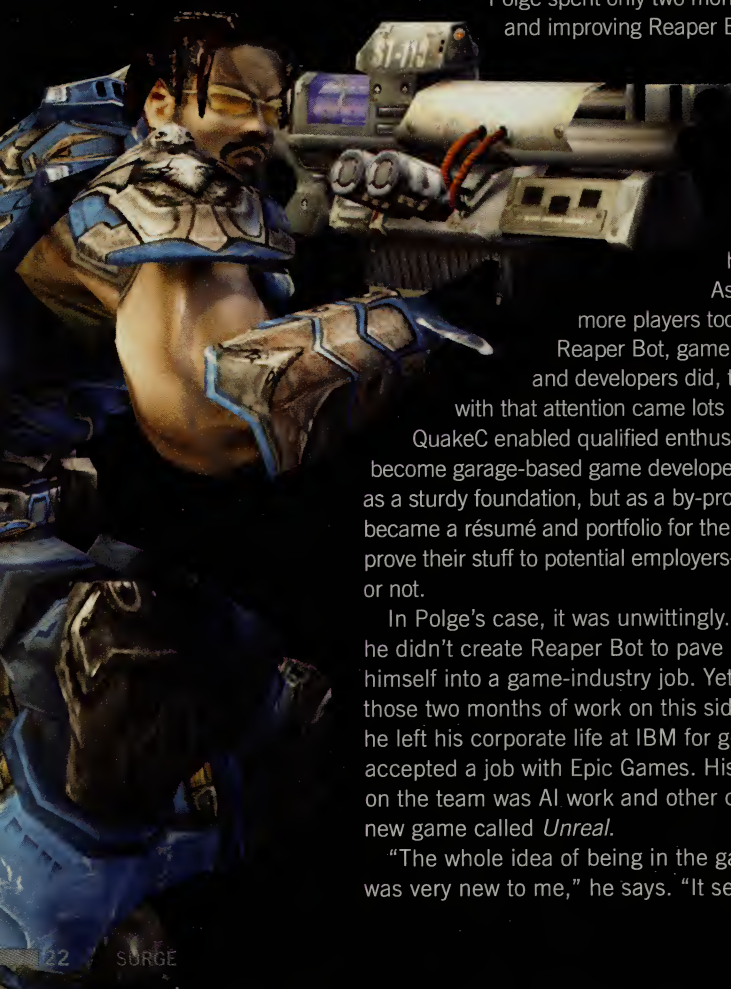
He says the random chain of events that brought him into the game-making business is now becoming a common part of the industry's hiring practices.

"We don't look at résumés. We're more interested in seeing stuff people have done. I think it's a much better indication of your abilities if you can make something really awesome — both being skillful at art or programming [and] also making something that people like. Mods are a really good way of showing that off.

"Any time we're looking for someone for a new position, the mod community is one of the first places we go. It's actually hard now. There are a lot of companies licensing Epic's engine. They look for talent in the mod community as well, and a lot of guys in the mod community are being snapped up."

Polge has gotten used to—and even welcomes—the hectic pace of a game programmer's life, working strange hours and getting little sleep. That part of it is only getting worse; this past fall, while rounding the final bend with *UT 2004*, he became a father for the first time, to twins. In his voice, there's a mixture of pride and weariness from juggling the two diverse works-in-progress.

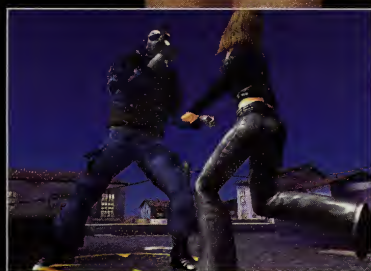
"In the last four weeks, I've basically had to give up sleep, between having newborn twins and trying to finish this game up," Polge said with a sigh. "But it's something I love to do. It's my hobby and my job." ●



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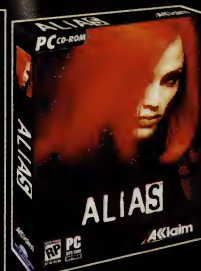
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No Boundaries

With genre-busting hits like *Splinter Cell* and the revamped *Prince of Persia*, Ubisoft Montreal keeps proving that creativity requires flexibility.

Over its 250-year history, Montreal has cultivated quite the reputation, and not just because it's responsible for Celine Dion. From its cobblestone streets to its rabid nightlife to its icy cold winters, the city seems an idyllic setting for gamers to set up camp. The winters are too cold to leave the comforts of your console for anything other than another beer run or the occasional—okay, frequent—strip club. It's a helluva daily regimen. The stuff of dreams.

So, it's not surprising to see Ubisoft establish an office in the fair city. It's even less surprising to see it

flourish. With Montreal's wealth of young designers and developers, a number of whom graduated from McGill University's strong computer engineering department, the bilingual city has become a hub of gaming creativity. Thanks to the fantastically popular titles Ubisoft Montreal (UM) recently produced, including Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, many a game publisher is following suit. Perhaps a little too closely.

"We wanted to have a production studio in North America, and Montreal seemed like the right city to set up shop," says Martin Tremblay, UM's president and CEO. "It's a cosmopolitan city where one can have the best of Europe and North America. Most importantly, there are many talented individuals here who are passionate about video games."

Starting as a small operation in 1997, UM put out its first games, *Speed Busters* and the *Playmobil* series, which helped secure work designing high-profile projects for Disney (*Tarzan Untamed*) and Warner Brothers (*Batman: Vengeance*). As a result, UM's staff swelled to around 400 after a mere 18 months, and it's only grown since. The initial titles impressed gamers, and UM didn't choke when following them up. In fact, the company's ambition shot upward, and it created some of the biggest titles of recent years.

Busting Open

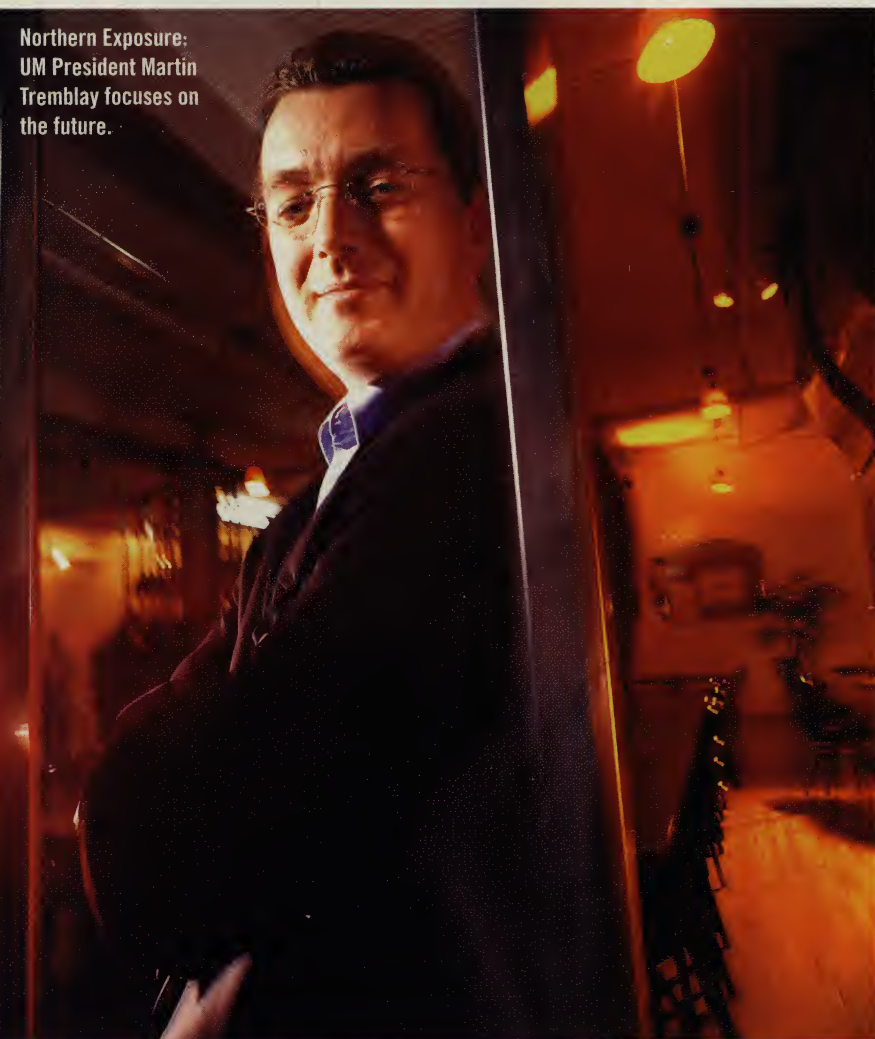
Allocating separate teams to specific games, Ubisoft Montreal maintains focus on the product at hand. One result of that devout focus was 2002's *Splinter Cell*, a game released and advised by Tom Clancy's gaming wing. That partnership reached greater heights with 2003's *Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield*, the latest in the Tom Clancy franchise. Both titles immediately became genre-defying hits, enjoying immense commercial and critical acclaim.

With *Splinter Cell* universally lauded as a groundbreaking stealth-action game, UM's reputation grew, and it established itself as a new gaming institution. "We wanted to provide an immersive and innovative experience to the player," says lead programmer Claude Langlais, who headed the *Prince of Persia* team at UM.

Langlais admits that the success of one team creates an incredibly competitive feeling throughout the company. "The high expectations of the *Splinter Cell* franchise put a little pressure on (the *Prince of Persia* team), but we're confident in our abilities." Those abilities reanimated a title that had been left for dead for more than a decade, a title that would go on to win Best Action-Adventure Game at the 2003 E3.

Jordan Mechner, who designed the original *POP* in 1984 as a student at Yale, was on hand to provide guidance to this new edition, which was a huge hit right out of the blocks. "It's been a great experience,

Northern Exposure:
UM President Martin
Tremblay focuses on
the future.



especially working with Jordan Mechner," says Langlais. "For a lot of people on the team, *POP* was the game that kept us awake at night and sleeping in classes."

The Little Things that Thrill

While UM's two marquee titles stand vastly apart in terms of sheer aesthetics, the awesome innovation at the root of both has made the company a gaming maverick. *Splinter Cell* and its much-anticipated follow-up, *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*, zero in on the little things: some of the greatest lighting effects ever, a wealth of tools and gadgets, and incredibly tight gameplay. The online component included with *Pandora Tomorrow* stands to further redefine the stealth-action genre.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time's vivid Middle Eastern setting made it one of the most visually stunning games of last year. With amazing action gameplay and the ability to reverse history with the Dagger of Time, the game stood high above many of its action contemporaries.

"Our aim is to amaze an increasingly diverse and growing number of players around the world," says Tremblay. "How? By driving the interactive entertainment experience beyond established limits on all platforms, online and off."

Cutthroat Competition

The influence of the Montreal office is undeniable; developers have already started emulating the outfit. Of course, there's emulation, and then there's blatant imitation.

That imitation refers to a recent lawsuit filed by Ubisoft against Electronic Arts and members of its Montreal team. Last August, UM applied for an injunction to block five key staff members, who had worked on the original *Splinter Cell* team, from taking new jobs at EA. The former Ubi staff left in July 2003 to take jobs with EA, despite what UM claims is a clause in their contracts forbidding them from working for any other gaming studio in North America within a year of leaving UM. With the case still pending, UM, the first studio to call Montreal home, was reticent in talking about it.

Regardless of the lawsuit, which is not believed to involve specific trade secrets, UM hasn't lost a step. With the success of the new *Prince of Persia* and *Splinter Cell*, the developer continues to test the bounds of gaming and design.

"With 700 people, Ubisoft Montreal has become the second largest video game development studio in the world," says Tremblay. "That means we have many projects under way on many platforms. It's a juggling act, but it seems we're getting the job done." ☺

Prince of Persia was one of the critical darlings of 2003.



Ubisoft Montreal Timeline

Ubisoft Montreal opens its offices with a small group of designers and a dream.

The company releases its first title, *Speedbusters*, with relatively little fanfare.

UM partners with Warner Brothers to bring the Dark Knight back to the console with *Batman: Vengeance*.

UM makes its mark on the gaming world with *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*.

Tom Clancy and UM rock the gaming world one more time with *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield*.

UM resurrects a classic game and makes waves doing it with *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*.

The legacy continues with the much-anticipated *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*.



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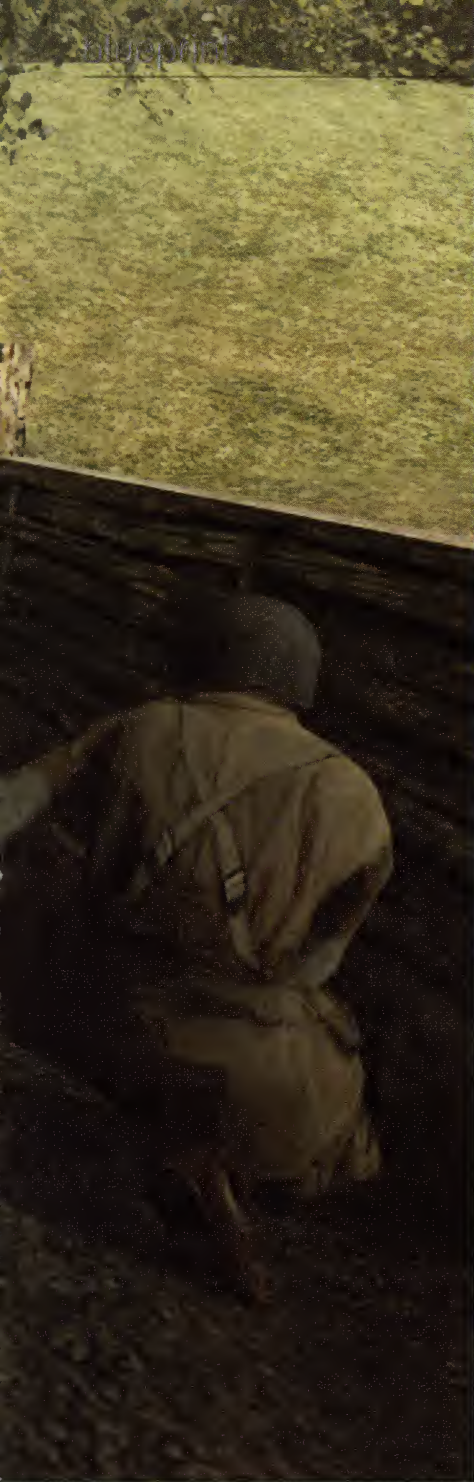
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call of duty



[THIS IS]



call of duty

SURGE bellycrawls through the trenches of Infinity Ward's gritty *Call of Duty* and gets the dirt on its split from EA.

by Peter Suci

WAR

Of course you did your part in World War II. You stormed the beaches of Normandy, thwarted the development of a secret Nazi aircraft, disabled missiles aimed to crush the Allied forces, and rushed behind enemy lines to rebury a powerful ancient demon unleashed by magic-obsessed Nazis. But have you ever hauled your haunches across Red Square, bullets spraying everywhere, as bombs drop overhead, buildings shake from the impact, comrades fall every foot of the way, and your sole focus is just *staying alive*? Have you ever experienced what WWII was *really* like for the common soldier? For most of us, the answer was "no." And then, *Call of Duty* arrived.

Activision's *Call of Duty* doesn't limit players to one theater of the war, or even one character. Grant Collier, president of Infinity Ward, the game's developer, says using multiple perspectives adds to the game's intensity and integrity, as it demonstrates the veracity of action that took place, not only from the American side, but also the British and Russian



fronts. "We were able to give fans a gritty WWII experience that we felt hadn't been seen before," he says. "Knowledgeable fans appreciate the attention to detail and the immersiveness that comes in a really well-produced title, and our fans are the best in the world. So we're excited that *Call of Duty* has been received so well."

Honor Calls

For an epic World War II action game that plunges players into the intense battles of Stalingrad, D-Day, and the final assault on the heart of Nazi

Germany, *Call of Duty's* beginnings were quite humble. Electronic Arts released the first *Medal of Honor* title for the PlayStation in 1999. It featured a typical, somewhat predictable story, but it amazed gamers with its realistic European countryside war settings and historically accurate weapons catalog—decidedly a departure from the fantastical science fiction stories that accompanied first-person shooters like Activision's *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. This spawned a sequel in 2000, *Medal of Honor: Underground*, which earned rave reviews, even though its release for the original PlayStation coincided with the launch of the PlayStation 2.



The series transitioned to the PC in early 2002 with *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. The same military advisor who guided *Saving Private Ryan*, retired Army Captain Dale Dye, jumped on board for the game, and with the realism he brought to the franchise, the title might have been the 2001 game of the year—had it been released a mere month earlier. The game's crowning moment was the D-Day landing sequence at Omaha Beach, which played like a scene-by-scene retelling of the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan*.

Allied Assault's innovations included friendly, nonplayer characters (NPC) that worked

alongside you like real troops in the field. No FPS game had ever succeeded at this. While the NPCs helped immerse gamers, the results felt scripted; the far too linear approach was the game's biggest downside. Regardless, *Allied Assault* was a great game, and it spawned a popular expansion pack, *Allied Assault: Spearhead*.

Infinity's Mutiny

During the lull that followed *Spearhead*'s release, many of the EA team members who had made *Allied Assault* such a smash decided to venture out on their



own and form their own company. The plan was to create the most intense action game possible—on their terms.

In January 2002, Infinity Ward was born, and the team gave great consideration to the nature of its first project. “Early in the development, there seemed to be a general feeling that there couldn’t be much left that hadn’t been tapped from World War II,” said Zied Rieke, lead designer on the project. “But once we started developing the AI for the teammates, and we saw what it would be like to fight alongside seven or more intelligent buddies, *Call of Duty* took on a life of its own.”

For IW president Grant Collier, working on a WWII game was natural, and the setting just made sense. “WWII is so rich in amazing stories that are filled with scores of unsung heroes, each of whom just did their duty to survive to the next battle,” he says.

While IW was happy with its freedom, Electronic Arts owned the hugely popular *Medal of Honor* franchise and had no plans to kill it due to a few defectors. The console title *Medal of Honor: Frontline* hit shelves a few months after *Allied*

Assault. Then, in the winter of 2003, EA announced the series would take a new direction, heading to the Pacific theater, while continuing the European theater with the expansion pack *Allied Assault Breakthrough*, which focused on the North African and Italian campaigns. The former core team members were not surprised by EA’s decision to continue. The two series would just have to live side by side.

“I’m sure [EA is] pleased with the direction that was taken and [with] the continued success,” Collier said. “We’ve gone on to enter an opportunity to work closely with Activision, of course, so I think we’d say that it’s worked out for the best [for both parties].”

Collier believes competition works in favor of the games, as it pushes companies to increase the quality of their products. “Comparisons of *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* would be a good example,” he says.

To fans, *Call of Duty* might seem like the natural evolution for *Medal of Honor*, but the team doesn’t quite see it that way. From the first moment it was shown to the gaming press in April of 2003, *Call of Duty* gave no mixed signals; its intensity would



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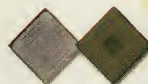
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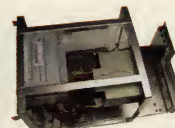
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pummel *Allied Assault*. One journalist described it as “the loudest game I’ve ever heard.”

Grant stressed that from the beginning, the team created *Call of Duty* so gamers could experience the run and cover of Brecourt and the adrenaline rush of taking and defending Pegasus Bridge in a race against time. The game jumped to the rarely covered Russian front, to situate players in a variety of harrowing, chaotic war scenes where thousands of soldiers died. “There’s so much to tell from all of these unbelievable encounters. We were convinced throughout the making of *Call of Duty* that fans would appreciate the scope of these battles.”

Ordinary Heroes

For Infinity Ward, it was necessary to set *Call of Duty* apart from the competition. IW borrowed key elements from recent World War II movies, including *Enemy at the Gates* and the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Like *Band of Brothers*, the game wouldn’t focus on the exploits of a single man, but would reaffirm that the titanic efforts of countless

individuals working together won WWII.

“We created this from the ground up, incorporating new ideas and different input throughout,” Collier said. “Sure, many games have been done, some very well, that allow players to play as super soldiers, saving the world solo—whether [in] WWII or in other operations. So, our commitment from the beginning was to create a new story, one that drew from the historic battles of WWII, and one that drew from the point of view of common soldiers.”

Evidence of *Call of Duty*’s radical shift in gameplay style commences with the opening sequence. While *Medal of Honor* has always spotlighted the lone wolf fighting against hundreds of enemies, *Call of Duty* zeroes in on the individual fighting alongside dozens, if not hundreds, of other individuals. Even if true teamwork doesn’t always come into play, the style of the game departs emphatically from the typical FPS, a constant since the days of *Wolfenstein 3D* more than a decade ago. Full immersion broadens the scope of the WWII game experience and magnifies each battle.

As you’re locked in combat, hundreds of guns

firing around you, much of the gameplay in *Call of Duty* doesn't involve overly heroic actions, but rather just trying to stay alive. This marks a major departure for action games, which tend to grant players larger-than-life abilities. While these battles rank high among the game's best points, *Call of Duty's* individual-based missions are equally thrilling.

"I know several people who consider those lone-wolf missions to be their favorite parts of the game," says Zied Rieke, lead designer on the project. "That's the great thing about *Call of Duty*. We were committed to providing an amount of depth and variety of gameplay."

Getting More With Less

While other anticipated shooters use the latest and greatest engines, *Call of Duty* stands out for doing much more with less. IW went back to basics, using the *Quake*-powered *Wolfenstein* engine, essentially stripping it down and building it back up. This helped smooth out the development process.

Ken Turner, the project's development director,

says, "The *Wolfenstein* engine allowed us to reach a prototype stage more quickly, since it already had a single-player component, while the base *Quake 3* engine does not." IW tweaked the engine to do what it wanted, and soon it had a hybrid engine capable of rendering the glorious sequences found in *Call of Duty*. "Before too long, pretty much every component of that framework was replaced to meet *Call of Duty's*

Mother Russian Victory

Call of Duty differs from other WWII games in that players take the role of foreign soldiers. Infinity Ward even devoted an entire campaign to the Soviet front, an area usually overlooked by American game designers.

Despite the horrors that the Soviet government inflicted on their own troops—they used commissars to "motivate" troops by shooting retreating comrades—the team felt it necessary to have players see things from the Russian perspective. Of course, this wasn't meant to be a Stalinist endorsement, but to show the sacrifices made by the common man on another front.

"If we made the Americans capture Berlin, thousands of kids wouldn't know any better," said lead designer Zied Rieke. "We have a great responsibility to get those things right."





“IN GENERAL, I WOULD SAY IT’S NOT THE FEATURES YOUR GAME HAS, BUT THE WAY YOU USE THEM”

—ZIED RIEKE,
LEAD DESIGNER

specific design goals,” Turner said.

With the system tweaked to their liking, the IW team could devote its energy to making a quality gameplay experience.

“In general, I would say it’s not the features your game has, but the way you use them,” Rieke said.

“As a team, our interest in technology was that it serves the gameplay and the cinematic purpose. We knew from the very beginning that

we wanted to have huge battles with lots of guys, and we made our technology choices to allow that.”

This required hordes of background characters to make the battles all the more real. Consider the horrific charge on Stalingrad’s Red Square, where dozens of NPCs and weather and smoke effects further immerse players in the brutal environment of war.

The thundering sound effects and sweeping music soundtrack make *Call of Duty* all the more compelling.

“I think music tends to be one of the most

consistently poorly done things in games, but most [publishers] seem to justify it by giving the player the ability to turn the music off,” Rieke said. To him, this is as ridiculous as turning off the music when you watch a movie, as it is a key component of the overall experience. “*Call of Duty* is about an intense and epic movie-like experience. The music is an integral part of delivering that sensation, so we balanced [it] with the sound effects into the overall mix and then removed the ability to turn it off.”

Too Brief a Tour?

While *Call of Duty* continues to impress gamers and reviewers alike, many complain that the solo campaigns are too brief. The final game can be finished in just about ten hours, and while this is satisfying for many players, it seems abridged. Rieke insists nothing was truncated during development.

“We didn’t scale anything back,” he says. “We had a very good idea of what we could do in the time we were given, and we did that.” The plan, according to Rieke, was to make the game intense and fun from beginning to end, and most players will agree that on these points, IW delivers.

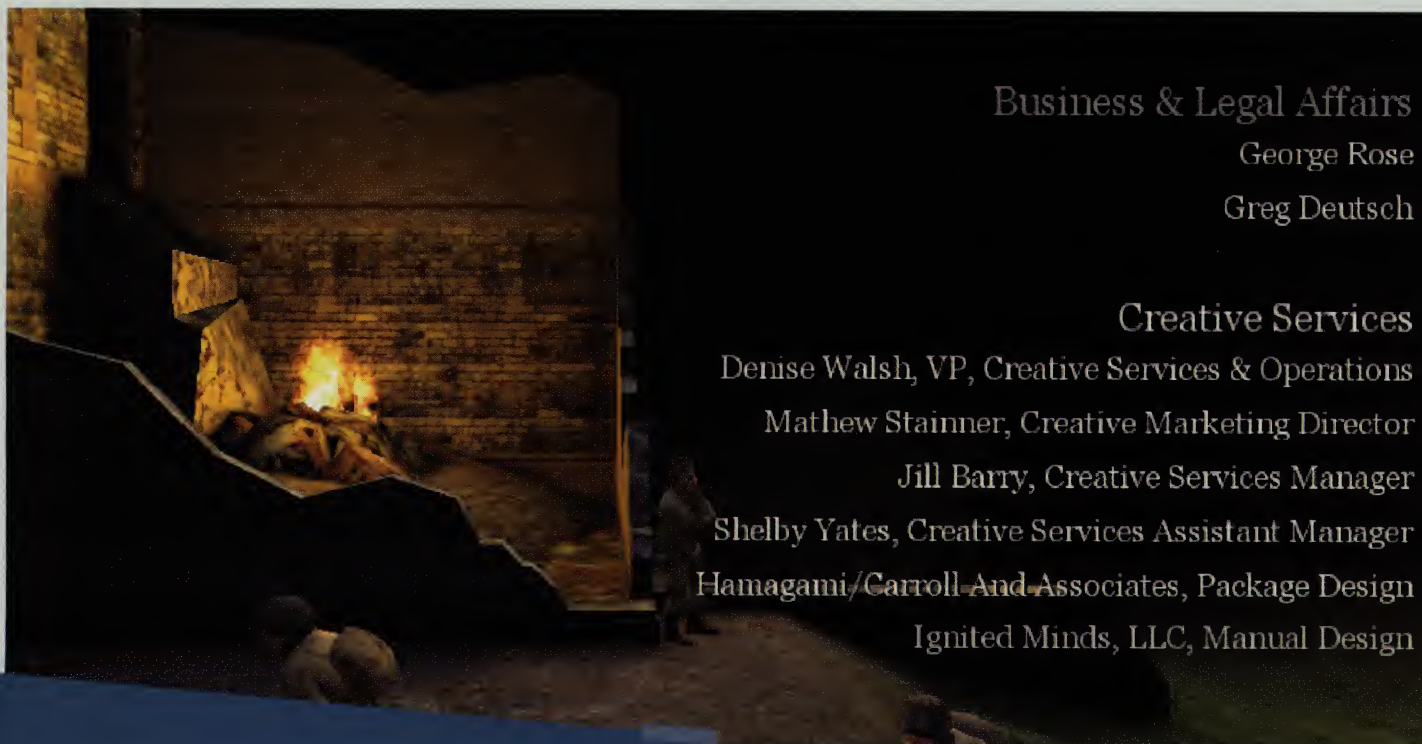
"We did numerous play tests, and anytime we found that the player was stuck because an area was too hard or that the player was confused or lost, we took that very seriously and fixed those areas to be less confusing or difficult," he says.

IW hoped that as a result of these changes, players would spend less time trying to figure out what to do next and accomplish goals quicker. More importantly, the game doesn't bog down play with increased-difficulty areas. For IW, this adds to the gameplay experience in a positive way, because the action is seamless, with reduced need to reload or try something again.

On one especially popular level, players drive the T-34 Soviet tank, raging against an assortment of hostile vehicles and stationary targets.

According to the development team, this element wasn't a result of the success of similarly themed games, like *Battlefield 1942*. Rieke contends IW always planned to offer a change of pace. "Infinity Ward doesn't do checklist design, where you make a list of every new gee-whiz feature in a game and then copy them one by one until you're done or you've run out of time," he stressed. "The tank missions are where they are because that's what best fit the story."

Where the game will go next Rieke wouldn't say, but a recent Activision conference call revealed plans for a *Call of Duty* sequel and console ports of the original title. Wherever the next game takes us, we feel confident its intensity will detonate on impact. ☞



Business & Legal Affairs

George Rose

Greg Deutsch

Creative Services

Denise Walsh, VP, Creative Services & Operations

Mathew Stainer, Creative Marketing Director

Jill Barry, Creative Services Manager

Shelby Yates, Creative Services Assistant Manager

Hamagami/Carroll And Associates, Package Design

Ignited Minds, LLC, Manual Design

When Credit's Due

Upon finishing *Call of Duty*, gamers are greeted by a little surprise. The credits feature a brief "retelling" of the game, as shown through a side-scrolling, 3D isometric view.

This sequence was completed entirely after hours by one of the game's scripters in about a week's time. All of its assets appear in the game, and it features many of the complex scripted elements that advance the story. Because players might miss these scripted moments during gameplay (you have to hit the john *sometime*, we know), the reasons behind this extra effort might not make complete sense. The credits provide a way of seeing these nuances again, or, now that your bladder's empty, for the first time.





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Go, Speed Racer

You've got the game, you've got the PC, and you've got the steering wheel. But you just don't feel like you're racing while leaning against your desk. The Virtual Racer X racing simulator's chromed-steel chassis comes complete with a sliding Corbeau Forza GT racing seat and wheel and pedal mounts. For \$975, the only thing missing is the smell of burning rubber.

Full-frequency tactile transducers (which the government uses in flight simulations) let you feel the rumble of the action, be it from your racing game, flight simulator, first-person shooter, or DVD. Just don't leave your keys in your back pocket. Trust us, it hurts.

■ Virtual Racer X; \$975; www.virtualracerx.com

Project Yourself

You might never own a television that occupies an entire wall for your gaming pleasure, but what if you could fool yourself into thinking that you do? Hey, ignorance is bliss.

You definitely won't appear ignorant with the Mitsubishi HC2 Home Theater ColorView Projector. The HC2 throws up to a 300-inch picture with surprising brightness and 600:1 contrast ratio, all bundled up in a small, portable design. With video and HDTV inputs, it's like carrying a billboard-sized television around in a 6.6-pound handbag. Connect it directly to your PC or console, and your games will literally be larger than life.

■ Mitsubishi; \$1,799; www.mitsubishihomecinema.com



Green With Envy

Desktop PCs have made amazing advancements over the past year in both speed and power. In comparison, gaming notebooks fell by the wayside. Voodoo's ENVY m:855 evens the score.

The first notebook PC to feature an AMD Athlon 64 processor (a future-proof powerhouse), this is the Maserati to the Pinto that is every other laptop. With its 64MB ATI Mobility 9600 Pro video card, 15-inch TFT display, and 512MB of RAM, the ENVY keeps pace with the latest powerhouse 3D PC games.

Unlike some of the tank-like gaming notebooks on the market, the eight-pound ENVY is sleek and small enough to draw envious stares rather than perplexed glares. The gorgeous paint job will make your notebook the crown jewel of the LAN party. Plus, this Voodoo's got a three-hour battery life to keep you fragging on the go.

■ Voodoo; \$2,695; www.voodoopc.com





Really Graphic

The folks at NVIDIA have done it again, unleashing a new mobile graphics processing unit (GPU) that instantly has been accepted by the world's leading notebook manufacturers. The GeForce FX Go5700, with its CineFX 2.0 engine, Ultrashadow technology, and Intellisample compression technology, provides world-class video quality and software features that will propel gaming to a new plateau. Toshiba already uses the GeForce FX Go5700 as the foundation of its upcoming mobile-computing products.

Meanwhile, back at the gaming braintrust, Alienware has adopted the GeForce FX Go5700 as an exclusive launch component for its gaming notebooks. If you're not keeping up with today's industry leaders, that means that the GeForce FX Go5700, before even hitting the market, has already established a new graphics standard.

■ NVIDIA; www.nvidia.com



Super Fast

Twelve milliseconds is really fast. That's about how long it takes for a hummingbird to take a breath between hums, the time it takes a gator to snap its jaws shut, or about the same amount of time it takes our jaws to hit the sand on a nude beach. It's also the incredibly short response time on Samsung's new Syncmaster 172X 17-inch LCD monitor.

With an ultranarrow bezel and MagicTune technology ensuring hands-free display adjustments, the 172X is the ideal companion to your dream gaming system. Now all you need to do is get your reflexes up to the same speed.

■ Samsung; \$649; www.samsung.com

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Screamworx S.P.U.G. LAN Box

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www.screamworx.com

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3.2-GHz Pentium 4

RAM
1GB PC3200 RAM

Hard Drive
160GB

Optical Drive
Sony 16X DVD-ROM,
Plextor DVD+/-RW

Display
15-inch NEC MultiSync
Thin Frame LCD

Graphics
ATI 256MB RADEON
9800 XT

Speakers
None

Audio
Onboard

High-Speed Ports
Two USB 2.0, FireWire

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online support

Known for building high-priced performance rigs with high-end parts and accessories, Screamworx has created a reputable name for itself, even though it has been around for only a couple of years. Its latest PC continues this trend in a much smaller form factor. Sure, the Screamworx Portable Ultimate Gaming (S.P.U.G.) LAN Box is a bit pricey compared to Falcon Northwest's FragBox Pro (*see opposite*), but as the saying goes, you get what you pay for.

With an Intel Pentium 4 Processor running at 3.2 GHz with Hyper-Threading technology and 1GB of Corsair TwinX PC3200 memory, the S.P.U.G. delivers a pounding to the FragBox Pro in terms of raw power. Further extending its might, the system packs a Seagate Barracuda SATA 7,200-rpm, 160GB hard drive; dual DVD drives (one reads and the other burns); and an ATI 256MB RADEON 9800 XT. Like the FragBox Pro, the S.P.U.G. has front USB, FireWire, and speaker hookups, and sound on both is limited to the onboard sound card, so the addition of an Audigy card would've sweetened the deal. The S.P.U.G.'s anodized case doesn't look as futuristic as the FragBox Pro's clear, blue-neon lit case, but the S.P.U.G.'s slick, black finish is sexy, and the machinery under it produces almost no noise. Unlike the FragBox Pro, the S.P.U.G. ships with a monitor (a 15-inch NEC LCD) and Windows XP Professional.

Very High Marks

The S.P.U.G. LAN Box blew us away in our benchmarks. It scored an incredible 4,345 on our 3DMark03 tests at 1024 x 768 and 3,187 at 1280 x 1024 with 4X antialiasing (you can insert the expletive

of your choice here). Our SYSmark 2004 test gave the S.P.U.G. an overall rating of 179, and our PCMark04 test gave it a 4,997 overall.

Why did the S.P.U.G. LAN Box outperform the FragBox Pro by such a huge margin? While the difference in clock speed is barely significant, the combination of the faster 9800 XT, the faster hard drive, and the Corsair memory gives the S.P.U.G. a major edge.

Game performance on this system was stellar. There isn't a game on the market today that this machine couldn't handle. *Call of Duty* at 1600 x 1200 resolution? We could hear the S.P.U.G. laughing at us. Our *Unreal Tournament 2003* test gave us better frame rates (110 fps) than the much higher priced Voodoo Extreme we reviewed in our last issue. How did *Halo* play? How does 1280 x 1024 with high detail levels strike you?

All of this performance is going to cost you—our test rig totaled \$3,054. Given its limited expansion possibilities (one PCI slot), it's hard to justify buying the S.P.U.G. LAN Box as your primary machine (much less as a second machine to use just for LAN parties), but if you can, you should.

PROS

Dual DVD drives

Super performance

Clean wiring

Incredibly quiet

CONS

Expensive

Onboard sound

Very small thumbscrews



Falcon Northwest FragBox Pro

Small and tough, like Joe Pesci

www.falcon-nw.com

\$1,800

CPU
2.8-GHz Pentium 4

RAM
1GB DDR SDRAM

Hard Drive
120GB

Optical Drive
DVD+/-RW

Display
None

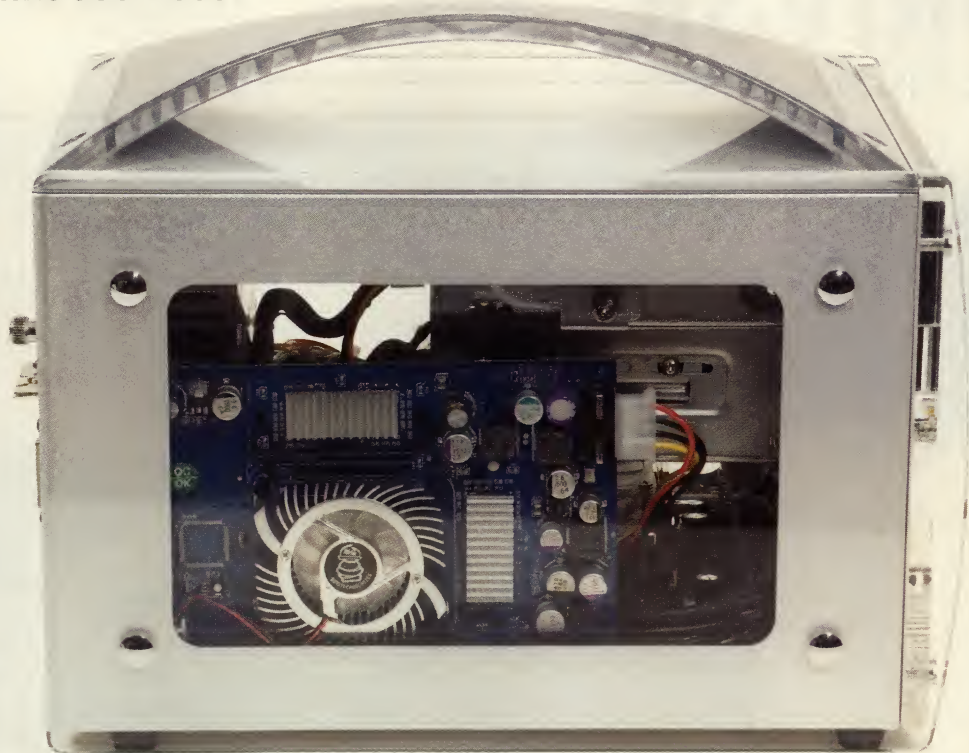
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Speakers
Logitech Z-680 5.1

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High-Speed Ports
Four USB, three
FireWire

Warranty/Tech Support
One year parts and
labor, lifetime toll-free
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Over the past decade, Falcon Northwest has made its name synonymous with top-notch gaming PCs. From the killer Mach V systems to the smartly priced Talon rigs, Falcon has given companies like Alienware and Voodoo cause to look over their shoulders. Its latest PC, the FragBox Pro, is guaranteed to turn heads wherever it goes, which could mean everywhere, since it's so portable.

Proving that good things come in small packages, this little bad boy kicks major butt. Under the clear, blue-neon lit encasement lies a 2.8-GHz Intel Pentium 4 processor with an 800-MHz frontside bus and Hyper-Threading technology; a 120GB, 7,200-rpm hard drive with an 8MB cache; and 1GB of DDR memory running at 400 MHz. Video comes courtesy of a 128MB ATI RADEON 9800 PRO, but for extra throttle, you can order a 256MB NVIDIA GeForce FX 5950 card instead. Other key features include a USB 2.0 controller with four ports and a FireWire controller with three ports.

Although we would've liked a Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS card, the onboard digital and analog six-channel support is quite good, and the front speaker jacks are a nice touch. The absence of a DVD burner was disappointing, even though its function on a gaming PC is a perk, not a necessity.

What's really cool about the FragBox Pro is that you get all of this performance in a concise, 14-pound package that measures 9.5 inches high, 8.3 inches wide, and 12 inches long. With the convenient built-in handle, transporting the FragBox

Pro from LAN party to LAN party is a no-brainer.

On our benchmarks, the FragBox Pro performed solidly. 3DMark03 tests scored an incredible 3,778 at 1024 x 768 and 1,869 at 1280 x 1024 with 4X antialiasing. You would expect these numbers from a full-sized rig, not from something your kid sister could carry around. Our SYSmark 2004 test yielded a score of 152, and the PCMark04 score was 3,348—again, big numbers from such a small package.

As you would expect, games ran beautifully on the FragBox Pro. Whether we were playing *Call of Duty* or *Unreal Tournament 2003* with full details at the highest resolutions, the FragBox Pro handled everything without issue. Resource hogs like *Halo* made the FragBox Pro choke a little bit, so we recommend going with the GeForce FX 5950 instead of the ATI board. We have a feeling the extra RAM will perform a lot better for you.

What we liked most about the FragBox Pro was the price. Our test system costs just \$1,800. Even though it doesn't come with a monitor, it's a great value, and will be more attractive to the common gamer than the totally tricked-out Screamer S.P.U.G. Falcon once again has created a machine that we don't hesitate to recommend.

PROS

Top handle

Front ports

Incredible value

CONS

Onboard sound

No DVD burner

DRIV3R

The 3 is an E, get it?

Publisher

Atari

Developer

Reflections Interactive

Genre

Action

Release Date

Spring 2004

PC | PS2 | Xbox



Driver and *Driver 2* quietly sold around 12 million copies. Now, Atari and Reflections Interactive have devised a third installment that plays like a Hollywood blockbuster of Bruckheimerian proportions. Though this aesthetic was present in the previous *Driver* titles, *DRIV3R*, with its greater graphics and larger environments, seems far more epic.

Tanner, the leather-chewing ex-cop and expert driver, is undercover once more to infiltrate a global car-theft ring and disrupt its plan to pull off the biggest heist in history. The rich storyline follows Tanner and his partner Tobias as they take part in enough tire-peeling car chases and shoot-outs to make Dirty Harry nervous. A full hour of CGI animation blurs the line between gaming and cinema, and voiceovers from Michael Madsen,

Mickey Rourke, and Ving Rhames don't hurt, either.

While Atari spent a lot of money bringing in Hollywood talent to work on this game from the ground up, the settings are the real draw. The design team accurately rendered more than 30,000 specifically placed buildings for scenes set in Miami, Nice, and Istanbul, and the results are tantamount to the most authentic South Beach joyride imaginable. More than 50 vehicles and 150 miles of highway make this sprawling action racer riveting.

With *DRIV3R*'s signature Film Director function, you can place cameras anywhere in the environment to record your hectic car chases. Even if you don't get to stop the worldwide crime syndicate, at least you'll get to work on becoming the next Steven Spielberg.

—TP

Fable

RPGs will never be the same.

Publisher
Microsoft

Developer
Big Blue Box

Genre
Action RPG

Release Date
2004

Xbox

Famed game designer Peter Molyneux on his latest project, the action RPG *Fable*: "I reckon that it is going to be the greatest role-playing game of all time." At least someone still has high standards. The crazy part? He may be right.

In *Fable*, players will live the life of a character from his youth to old age. Along the journey through the medieval world of Albion, your story develops through the actions you take and the allegiances you choose, good or evil.

Though the story is linear, the game's open-ended nature is truly amazing. You can ignore your quests in favor of a pub crawl, marry and have children, buy a house and post up in a cozy village, or wander the countryside to loot travelers. The world will react to your prestige and appearance accordingly. If you own a menacing scowl and a reputation for bar fights, children will scatter in your presence. If you've built your reputation



Hip Tip: Eye shadow completes this ensemble.



on spreading goodwill, your reception will be much more hospitable.

To avoid the stale turn-based RPG convention, Big Blue Box built a real-time combat engine. Players will hone the art of swordsmanship, wizardry, and stealth during their interaction with foes. As you develop your skills, your appearance will change to reflect your decisions. Swashbuckler's muscles will bulge, and the skin of shadow dwellers will pale. Along the way, you'll collect scars from your decisive battles. Nothing says "ass-kicker" like a swollen welt across your forehead.

The game features multiplayer support for up to four people. Your friends can become the alter ego of the main character and assume responsibility during battles. The most successful will win the role of the main character.

Fable's epic scope leaves it open to many gameplay problems, but Big Blue Box and Molyneux are taking the time to make sure it lives up to their expectations. If the game follows through, it will be well worth the extended wait.

—MB

The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth

One RTS to rule them all

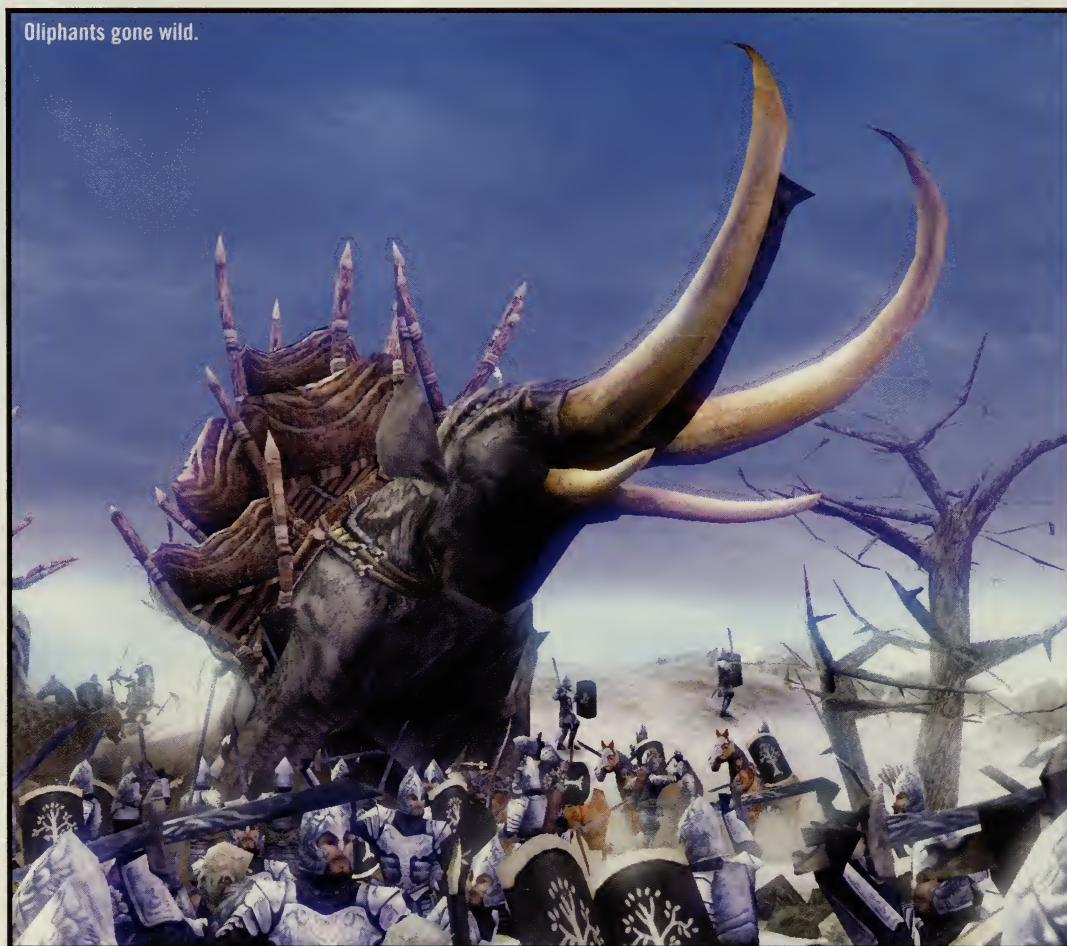
Publisher
EA

Developer
EA LA

Genre
RTS

Release Date
Summer 2004

PC



Thanks to the success of the movie trilogy, EA is sucking *The Lord of the Rings'* teat dry with the new game franchise based on the films: *The Battle for Middle-earth*. The real-time strategy game for the PC gives players greater control of the J.R.R. Tolkien story, rather than resorting to the basic, boring hack n' slash.

The Battle for Middle-earth will feature characters from the movies, as well as the look and feel of the Peter Jackson retelling. You will control the heroes of Middle-earth and fight in key battles from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*. You don't have to play toward the films' outcome, so you can change the events and play in Sauron's favor if you wish. (In case you were wondering, Vivendi released its own RTS based on the Tolkien novels, *War of the Ring*, but the cartoony graphics were a turnoff for film buffs. EA, however, must stick with the films to use the license.)

Though it uses the engine from *Command & Conquer: Generals*, RTS fans will find *The Battle for Middle-earth* a new experience. But, it's clear EA wants something different from the usual RTS; the engine is enhanced, so expect some eye-opening graphics.

Players can assume the role of good or evil and then choose one of four forces—Rohan, Mordor, Isengard, or Gondor—each with its own unique battle methods, base building, and resource management. In addition to the expected orcs, knights, and archers, there are trolls, Oliphants, Ents, and the heroes from the movies. You can follow a single-player campaign or head straight to the front lines online.

The film's huge battles are highly stylized and graphically delicious, so the game has *Total War*-like expectations to live up to if it wants to impress.

—LS

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Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Tastes like chicken

Publisher
Konami

Developer
Konami

Genre
Stealth Action

Release Date
2004

PS2



Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty was a triumph in game design. It combined breathtaking graphics with a unique story, great controls, and an original (albeit cheesy) soundtrack, all the while offering the PlayStation 2 graphics to levels no one had seen at the time. Expect the same out of *MGS 3: Snake Eater*, and then some.

Welcome to the jungle, where Snake (or somebody who looks like Snake) drops down and must infiltrate an enemy base. From what we gather, the game takes place decades before the previous two *MGS* titles, and given *MGS*'s various plots and conspiracy theories, the lead character may not be who he seems.

This isn't your standard *MGS* experience: there are rivers to swim, trees to climb, and caves to spelunk. To survive, Snake must use camouflage to blend into his surroundings and feast on bugs, fish, and snakes for his nutrition, if you can call it that. Using guns and traps, you stealthily put down enemies lurking in the brush. They don't have as much backup as in the previous games, but the AI will be skilled enough to counter your moves. And there are crocs, lots of them.



It's no surprise that the graphics are stunning. Konami spent its time crafting the trailer shown at the last E3, so the game can only be equally as good, if not better.

MGS3 features more music from composer Harry Gregson-Williams, and from what we heard in the trailer, we plan on playing with the volume low. The music's decent, but the lyrics are embarrassingly sappy, an unfitting soundtrack for Snake while he's fighting for survival in the jungle.

—Les Shu

Onimusha 3: Demon Siege

Starring Jean Reno as a surly Frenchman

Publisher
Capcom

Developer
Capcom

Genre
Action Adventure

Release Date
May 2004

PS2



With almost 5,000,000 copies sold in the series, the third *Onimusha* game faces an intimidating headcount of devotees to appease. Developing the latest installment as a cinematic delight, Capcom answers the call.

Taiwanese action star Takeshi Kaneshiro plays the famed Samanosuke. Capcom cast French actor Jean Reno, as Jacques Braun.

Though the two heroes occupy two different

periods of history, Samanosuke is transported to modern-day Paris, while Braun relocates to 16th century Japan, both are trying to save their respective worlds from a horde of ancient Japanese demons. This daunting task isn't all that different from previous *Onimusha* titles, but the modern-day setting breathes new life into the timeless conundrum.

The game's appearance has improved considerably from the previous titles. The incredibly detailed renderings of ancient Japan and contemporary France (complete with the Louvre being attacked by toothy monsters) deliver a big-screen feel. The character renderings are particularly impressive, with detailed costumes, weapons, and vehicles. Jacques' deadpan, sleepy-eyed face makes him look poised under extreme pressure.

As for the gameplay, expect the same dose of slaying monsters with extreme malice. At least Jacques wields a new weapon, an interesting-looking medieval gauntlet that acts primarily as a whip, à la Indiana Jones. This fun addition gives players the ability to attack enemies, perform combos, climb cliffs, and even grab objects.

Fans of this popular series should be psyched about the new episode. We sure are.

—TP



Mon épée flambant est très chaud!

Painkiller

Senseless violence—makes sense to us

Publisher
Dreamcatcher Interactive

Developer
People Can Fly

Genre
FPS

Release Date
Spring 2004

PS2 | Xbox



Backstage at a Marilyn Manson concert.

Let's get this straight—to gain entrance to Heaven, we must frag the hell out of a bunch of demons? Sounds good to us.

Though we appreciate the style and sophistication of current first-person shooters, many purists admit to missing the gory *Quake*-esque guns/ammo/legions-of-enemies-to-massacre formula. For this sickness, *Painkiller* is our prescription of choice.

Set in purgatory, *Painkiller* follows the story of Daniel Garner, an average Joe stranded in limbo after he and his wife die in a car crash. Before God will let him into Heaven, Garner must bust out the BFG and clean house in the demonized locales where Lucifer is making progress in his eternal war against righteousness.

Like the good old days, you will face hoards of demi-demons, zombies, and floating skulls just itching to take you out. Though many of the enemies are easy kills, the sheer number of them will keep you strafing and fragging long into the

night. *Painkiller* also marks the triumphant return of the Boss Fight, as Garner must take out Lucifer's generals one by one to gain his salvation.

Armed with a proprietary graphics engine and the Havok 2.0 physics engine, *Painkiller* is a marvel to watch. The various settings, which include creepy Gothic cathedrals, a Venice-like canal city, and a prison, are rendered in detail that easily rivals the best engines used today. With great weapons like the stake gun, the developer, People Can Fly, has put the Havok engine to good use, and you can spend your free time stapling demons to the walls or the floor. Watching an evil monk fly back five yards and stick to the wall may never grow old.

Both the Xbox and PC version will support online multiplayer battles to keep the gory action fresh long after you gain salvation. We have one declaration for *Painkiller*: Bring it on.

—Matt Bertz

Red Ninja: End of Honor

Because ninjas deserve another game

Publisher
Vivendi Universal

Developer
Tranji

Genre
Action

Release Date
Fall 2004

PS2 | Xbox

Remember how you cringed at the sight of Uma Thurman cutting limbs like butter in *Kill Bill*? Oh, you actually enjoyed it? Us too, and here's a game to bring you more of the same sadistic pleasures: Vivendi's *Red Ninja: End of Honor* explores the ways of the stealth warrior and the fine art of decapitation.

In feudal Japan, the samurai warrior class has weakened, and the only way for the battling clans to hold onto power is to enlist ninjas. You play as Kurenai, a young female ninja (kunoichi) whose destiny is to destroy the Black Lizard Clan and avenge her father's death.

As a girl, she and her father were attacked by the BLC. They hung her on a wire and left her to die, and she now uses that very wire, the Tetsugen, as her weapon.

The wire's strength and power is determined by its length and attachments, and with it, she can

slice through her opponents' heads or torsos with the ease of a Salad Shooter. There are many more gruesome uses of the Tetsugen, and they all include cutting or hanging. Sweet.

Unlike Ryu of *Ninja Gaiden* or Hotsuma of *Shinobi*, Kurenai is more than the usual ninja. She can use her womanly charm to seduce her enemies, escape or infiltrate using stealth and her Ninjutsu powers, and access extra weapons like guns and explosives. All of this is done in beautiful, hand-drawn environments of 14th century Japan.

The event-driven game combines action and stealth, like a medieval *Splinter Cell*, if you will. With a story written by director Shinsuke Sato, Vivendi wants *Red Ninja* to differ from predictable ninja plots. The game won't be ready until later this year, but we're looking forward to this one.

—LS



Ninja formal wear?

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

The fifth freedom—so hot right now

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

Genre
Stealth Action

Release Date
Fall 2004

GC | PS2 | PC | Xbox



Couldn't we use the door just this once?

Despite never having served in the US military, Tom Clancy and Ubisoft have made some of the most authentic military games of all time, thanks largely to their team of designers and consultants. With the return of Sam Fisher in *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*, it looks like they may strike pay dirt again.

Don't mistake *Pandora Tomorrow* for a simple update of the original title—it is so much more. This time, Fisher is working to allow the freedom-loving folks from East Timor to split from war-torn Indonesia, but the entrenched Indonesian government has other plans. As in the original, you need stealth tactics to make your way through this deep campaign, but you'll find a lot more to enjoy along the way. The introduction of new characters and greater access into Fisher's psyche and organization help *Pandora Tomorrow* keep your attention. The title sheds linear gameplay in favor of a more open-ended environment. Now, Fisher has several avenues in front of him to complete his missions.

The most talked-about addition is the online multiplayer mode, in which multiple Fishers from around the world can engage in stealth missions together. With four players (either 3 on 1 or 2 on

2), one group will assume the role of heavily armed mercenaries, patrolling the dim hallways, while the other(s) will lurk in the shadows, attempting to retrieve sensitive information without being detected. For the first time in an online game, the third-person-perspective spies will play against the first-person-perspective mercenaries, which evens the odds. Players will be able to communicate with other people in their group, and if you sneak up on an unsuspecting guard and put him in a grappling hold, you'll be able to whisper sweet nothings in his ear as he soils his pants.

Splinter Cell was a gorgeous game, but Ubisoft wasn't satisfied simply reusing the same old engine. The animations, settings, and graphics are all revamped and vastly improved in *Pandora Tomorrow*, and the enhanced reflections and light contribute significantly to gameplay.

Stealth gaming fans, with their gruff, Fisher-like exteriors, pretend to be a picture of calm composure when talking about this game, but on the inside we know they're dying to get their hands on *Pandora Tomorrow*. Strap on the night vision, you're going in.

—TP



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S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

Nuclear winter wonderland

Publisher
THQ

Developer
GSC Game World

Genre
FPS/RPG

Release Date
Fall 2004

PC

Kiev-based GSC Game World touches upon a subject very close to home in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, its latest post-apocalyptic action romp. While most titles of this type take place in the distant future, GSC puts its protagonist smack in the middle of Chernobyl following a second nuclear-reactor meltdown, dated April 12, 2006, at 2:33 p.m.

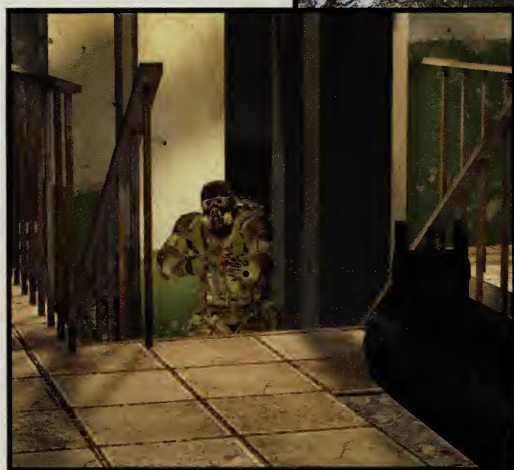
The game's ultrarealistic environment will feature a perfect replica of the reactor site. As the stalker in question, you'll search the ruins of Chernobyl four years after the meltdown, confronting hell-spawned beings along the way and collecting valuable artifacts to sell to the highest bidder. The freakish mutants aren't your only worry. With 100 rival stalkers to compete against, this isn't just another boring see-'em-and-shoot-'em FPS. You'll have to form and break alliances, making friends and enemies, while shifting your standing in the 30-acre gaming zone. With special forces, rogue stalkers, scientists, and artifact dealers to haggle with over your findings, you'll have to be equal parts soldier, archaeologist, diplomat, and used car salesman to



ensure your livelihood. How friendly you are with the AI characters you encounter will determine which of the eight different endings you discover.

While the depth of the gameplay seems incredibly ambitious for a first-person shooter, it is the gaming environment that appears to set this title apart. With semi-disintegrated buildings and the sky bearing an odd bluish-gray tint, you'll almost be able to smell the uranium in the air and feel the nuclear fog corroding your skin. You won't have to spend all your time on the radioactive soil, though. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* has an impressive variety of vehicles, from old Moskvich cars to Mi-24 helicopters. Despite all the obstacles in your way, the radioactive elements of post-nuclear Chernobyl are actually more dangerous than the mutants out to eat you.

—Tal Pinchevsky



Van Helsing

Monster hunting 101

Publisher
Vivendi Universal

Developer
Saffire

Genre
Action

Release Date
Spring 2004

PS2 | Xbox

Whenever there's a blockbuster movie slated for release, you're sure to find a tie-in game following hot on its heels. This May, director/writer Stephen Sommer (of *Mummy* and *The Scorpion King*) will unleash *Van Helsing*. Judging from his body of work, we're not sure how the film will do, but it has to be more interesting than watching The Rock try to act his way out of a wet paper bag.

Van Helsing is Bram Stoker's monster hunter, and in Sommer's reimagination, he's been called to Transylvania for some one-on-one with the likes of Dracula and Frankenstein's monster (forget the fact that Frankie just wants a friend). The game is set in the 19th century. The Renaissance seems to have skipped Eastern Europe, and the land is still battling evil of mystical proportions. It's up to Van Helsing to save this goulash-eating region before evil takes hold.

The game's concept recalls titles like *Castlevania* and *Devil May Cry*. In third-person perspective, *Van Helsing* will put players in battles taken from the film, though the storyline is all its own. Dressed like a pilgrim who missed the Mayflower departure, Van Helsing battles ghouls and monsters in eerie, dark, pine-tree-filled locales, using weapons like blades, pistols, shotguns, and a hand-cranked gatling gun, which we're pretty sure wasn't invented at the time, but who's keeping track? He will also have a grappling hook for climbing cliffs and castle walls. As he travels through Transylvania, Van Helsing will knock on the doors of Frankenstein and Dracula. Don't expect a friendly welcome.

The game will be released when the film hits theaters. The film, by the way, stars Hugh Jackman,



best known as Wolverine in the *X-Men* films. Let's just hope the game rocks, though it seems like this may be too much to ask from licensed games these days.

—LS



Some assembly required.

SUP



ERNOVA

With *StarCraft: Ghost*, Blizzard is bursting back onto the console scene.



It's one thing to lord above a battlefield, sacrificing dozens of units while storming a cadre of Protoss Zealot infantrymen. It's something else entirely to lurk among them on the ground, cold and alone in a downpour, hugging the shadows, debating the best way to take out the approaching Zealot. He's bigger and more powerful than you. You'll have to knock out his shields and, once you have his attention, attack one of his few weak spots with the perfect hit. One shot is all you'll get. This ain't *Doom*, and there is no BFG.

Is this the experience that the three million-plus people who bought *StarCraft* have dreamed of since the original RTS arrived in 1997? The faithful will receive a very different animal in 2004, *StarCraft: Ghost*. Not only has Blizzard Entertainment switched *StarCraft* from strategy to 3D third-person action, but it also ditched the PC for the GameCube, PS2, and Xbox. In an even more surprising move, Blizzard has chosen a third-party studio, Nihilistic Software, to program and design the follow-up to its baby. Each decision seems more risky than the next, but with six straight one million-plus hits notched on its belt, Blizzard is one of the few game studios that can pull it off.

The stakes are huge for one of the pivotal game franchises of the past ten years. That's why SURGE went to visit Blizzard headquarters in Irvine, Calif., to talk to producer John Lagrave and director of game design Rob Pardo. We wanted to see for ourselves how closely *Ghost* follows *StarCraft*, and to satisfy those nagging doubts about whether or not *Ghost* will even play like a Blizzard game.

Storming the Industry

Blizzard ascended to the throne of the real-time strategy genre during the 1990s, selling millions of copies of *Warcraft* in its several incarnations. Then, the company took the turn-based, role-playing game and morphed it

into a real-time action hybrid called *Diablo*, another chart-busting hit. When the time came to satiate demands from the *Warcraft* faithful for another dose, Blizzard instead took the formula to the outer reaches of space with *StarCraft*. The dollars kept rolling in.

Blizzard's run is all the more amazing when you consider that its PC games were selling in the millions when conventional wisdom maintained that only PlayStation titles could reach so many gamers. What many forget—or never knew—is that Blizzard cut its teeth making console games. Leading up to *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* in 1994, Blizzard, as a third-party developer, created a slew of action video games, including *The Lost Vikings* (1992, Genesis/SNES), *Blackthorne* (1994, SNES), *The Death and Return of Superman* (1994, Genesis/SNES), and *Justice League Task Force* (1995, SNES).

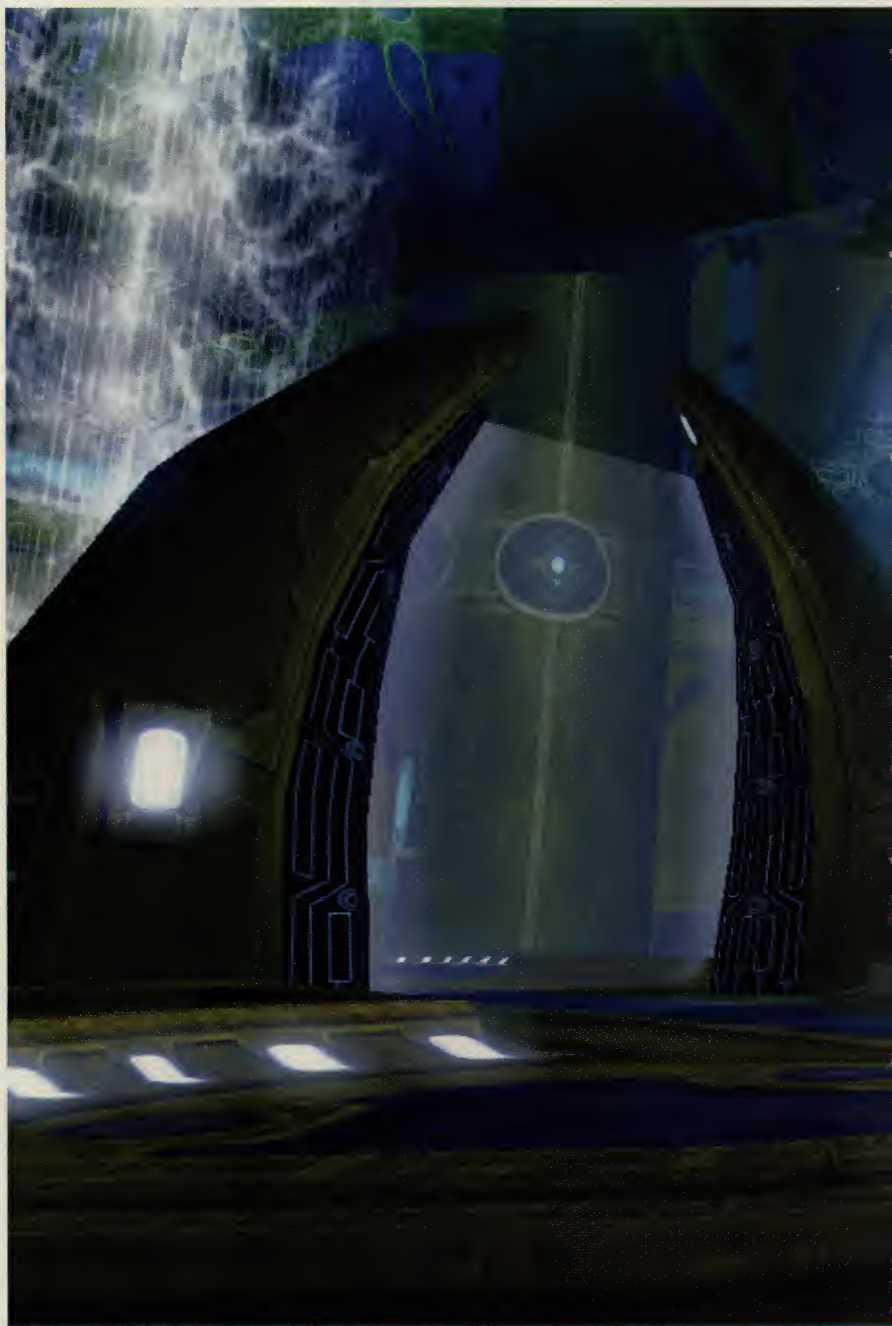
The innovative minds at Blizzard remember their roots. Just as they took the greatness of *Warcraft* and morphed it into *StarCraft* to satisfy their own desire to break new creative ground, this year they'll bring us *StarCraft: Ghost*, a third-person action adventure designed for GameCube, PS2, and Xbox that builds on the original *StarCraft* while forging a highly distinctive identity for itself.

A Friend in Need

Left to its own devices, the Blizzard team would have loved to design the *StarCraft* sequel themselves. In a perfect world, they'd suffer no shortages in manpower, conflicts between projects, or time constraints. They've thus far enjoyed a lucky string of self-determination; a succession of corporate owners—including Davidson, Sierra Online, Cendant, Havas, and Vivendi—have practiced a hands-off policy, not forcing Blizzard to devote resources to, say, an Incredible Hulk RTS. And until recently, Blizzard got by with only two development teams maintaining its three popular franchises. It added a third team recently, but it dedicates its resources to *World of Warcraft*, which is more like a fourth property than just another *Warcraft*.

In 2000, right around the time Blizzard North completed *Diablo II*, the main studio returned its attention to devising another *StarCraft*.

"Many of us thought about going back into console games, and we started throwing around ideas," John Lagrave says. "Everyone wanted to get back into *StarCraft*, but all of our development groups were too thin because of other projects." With *Warcraft III* and *World of Warcraft* tying most of the staff down to their cubicles, there just weren't enough folks at Blizzard to start another *StarCraft* project.



Nova sneaks up on a High Templar emanating psionic energy.



The Zerglings look much more imposing up close than they did in the original *StarCraft*.



THE STAKES ARE HUGE FOR ONE OF THE PIVOTAL GAME FRANCHISES OF THE PAST TEN YEARS.

Then, Nihilistic Software, a small developer best known for *Vampire: The Masquerade—Redemption*, piqued Blizzard's interests with a proposal for an action game based on *StarCraft*. "Nihilistic brought the *Ghost* idea to us complete with test material they had already worked up," Rob Pardo says. "We were very impressed. We had always entertained the idea of working with third parties, but going in that direction had never been a priority before."

Blizzard's desire to return to *StarCraft* and console games finally found a vehicle in Nihilistic's pitch. Pardo says it was never Blizzard's strategy to abandon

console development—it always planned to return to consoles—but its success temporarily led it down the PC path.

Doting Papas

After Nihilistic's initial proposal, a great deal of discussion took place at the Blizzard HQ about the *Ghost* story. Although Pardo characterizes the story development as a collaborative effort, he says Blizzard has generated most of the overall narrative.

"We're the worst kind of overprotective parents," Lagrave says. "We're zealous in protecting our



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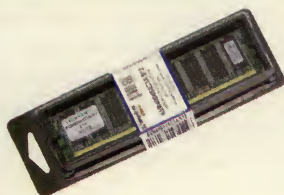
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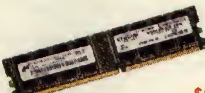
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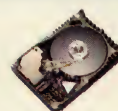
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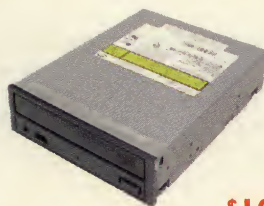
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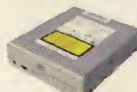
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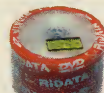
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intellectual property in general, and we're zealous in protecting *Ghost* in particular." That's not a slight to Nihilistic so much as it is a testament to the way Blizzard works; the design staff has a hard time letting go of any of its babies.

"You have guys walking around here with ten years into the company working 24-hour days," Lagrave says. "These are people who are not on my project, but who walk into my office and ask to see my creative notes because they have an idea, and they want to make a suggestion. Without asking, I have a tremendous creative pool to draw upon that's always generating plenty of ideas that make their way into the game."

Lagrave, who joined Blizzard seven years ago to work on *StarCraft*, says letting go of its sequel wasn't an option, partially because of his investment in the original and partially because Nihilistic can pull off only so much as a small studio. "Working with Nihilistic has been incredible," he says. "They're [an] amazingly talented, tight team, but they've only [recently] hit 20 people."

Everything generated by Nihilistic has to be approved by Blizzard, with something coming in almost every day, he says. And though he trusts them ("Everyone there is very bright. Not a dumbass to be found."), he can't stop himself from helping out.

"Oh man, I hope I'm not a distraction to them. If they were making a cake, it would be like me stepping into their kitchen and saying, 'Let me help you with the icing.'"

Blizzard's churning out plenty of icing for

Ghost. All of the cinematics are created in-house, and Lagrave thinks the work rivals that of major animation studios. Blizzard artists also assist Nihilistic with developing models and environments. This assures that characters, buildings, and equipment in *Ghost* meet *StarCraft* stalwarts' expectations.

If the build we played is any bellwether, the art design in *Ghost* completely captures the spirit of *StarCraft*. At the same time, the game is consistent with visual motifs seen in *Warcraft* and *Diablo*. In fact, *Ghost* plays like a huge *StarCraft* or *Warcraft III* cinematic.

Bringing the Past to the Future

As he tears through levels of the most recent Xbox build of *Ghost*, Lagrave shows off the five different worlds that players will have to circumnavigate in the game. He appears pleased and excited by the assets coming in from Nihilistic as he shows off desert, jungle, asteroid, and molten environments.

What is striking, before Lagrave even has a chance to mention it, is how well *Ghost* pulls off its homage to the original RTS at ground level. Familiar units and structures are present, as expected, but for the first time, you can view them up close and in extremely high detail.

The story centers on Nova, a highly skilled Terran ghost agent trained in espionage and tactical combat. Although Lagrave is pleased with how Nova has developed visually as a character—her stances and kill moves, the way she hugs walls around steep caverns, and the overall fluidity to her movements—he doesn't start to gush until he sneaks up on a Zerg Hydralisk, an alien creature with amazing natural weaponry and armor. The Hydralisk is both imposing and frightful in ways that well surpass *StarCraft*, and its affectations and deft movements are captivating to see up close.

Turning off the AI, Lagrave draws in close to some huge Zealots (infantrymen) and Templars (psionic warriors), members of the highly technological Protoss race, to admire the majestic power of the models. "This is how I imagined these guys should look, back when we were working on *StarCraft*," he comments. "It is possible to make a kill shot on them, but it won't be easy."

To prove the point, Lagrave moves to a new Protoss character, the Purifier, a hulking psi-energy warrior reminiscent of a flamethrower. "Let one of these guys fire on you for more than a couple of seconds and you're toast," he says.

The Power of Psi

Ghost is all about completing your missions covertly. In fact, many of the game's levels have an intriguing *Metal Gear Solid* quality. Nova can pull off real-time



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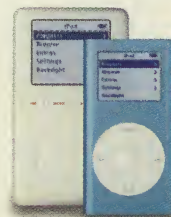
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—ROB PARDO,
DIRECTOR OF GAME DESIGN





Branching Out

In addition to the games, there's a growing demand for books, action figures, and other ancillary items based on Blizzard's properties. Managing it all can take on a life of its own.

"We had a master plan that getting into merchandise was somewhere we wanted to go, but we also waited to see what opportunities came our way," Pardo says. "But the way this merchandise took off, especially in Korea, really surprised us."

In much the same way that Blizzard works closely with Nihilistic on *Ghost*, Pardo says the studio is heavily involved in all licensed properties based on the games. In the case of the books, Blizzard oversees much of the story development, working with the authors to make sure the end product is true to the game universe. The development teams also provide a substantial amount of the art for the books and action figures.



kill shots from stealthy locations, but if any of the enemies are on the move, she will be forced to retreat or use her three psi powers.

Nova's Speed power slows down prey to a quarter of their normal speed, while she reacts at a normal pace. The Cloak power renders Nova invisible, which is useful for sneaking past a large number of baddies. The Sight power is an effective, low-light vision enhancer, similar to the famed Predator's visor, but with much more detail. It allows Nova to see recent footprints, interactive control panels, enemies behind walls, and weak spots in enemy armor. Once Nova depletes her psi charge, she should make her way back into the shadows.

Several extra tools help Nova slip by obstacles. The three insect-like drones at her disposal are indispensable: The Mantis is a reconnaissance mine that scurries around undetected to show players what they have to face on each level. The Spider mine is a walking explosive device that can sneak up on combatants or burrow undetected under a target's patrol path. The Firefly distracts enemies and can lead them into an ambush or away from your destination.

Players will have a lot of freedom to choose how to complete the game's current 23 levels. "There are times when you can go blasting through a level, and I am sure there are a lot of people who will do that, but as you get further along, that play style will get progressively more difficult to pull off," Lagrave says.

"These are very straightforward levels. If you want to quickly complete the mission goal, great. If you'd rather explore, great. We won't punish you for taking time to explore, and this being a Blizzard game, you'll be rewarded if you don't rush through."

Though *Ghost* looks a bit different on different platforms, and offers a degree of variation in control options, Lagrave says it will have the exact same content on each console.

World Domination

Pardo traveled to the Tokyo Game Show 2003 in September and was amazed by the diversity of questions journalists from different parts of the world asked in reference to *Ghost*, and how the region of the journalist affected the nature of the question.

"The Koreans are obsessed with the *StarCraft* universe, its lore, story, and how *Ghost* fits in," he said. "The Europeans are always asking about very specific gameplay dynamics. Then there are the Japanese, who are uniformly curious about individual characters, their backgrounds, and motivations."

The sweeping range of interest in the minutia of *Ghost* means Blizzard must manage the worlds it creates on a truly global stage. The company has seen it all before, though. Titles like *Warcraft*, *Diablo*, and *StarCraft* are so successful that they're no longer just games—they're power franchises.

Nova must use her psionic abilities to navigate around enemies.

Pardo admits he feels a lot of pressure from gamers to extend the experience of their favorite properties. Licensed merchandise can help stave off those desires temporarily, but Blizzard understands that satisfying those demands always comes back to developing new games.

"We try hard to do the best we can to support our fans and have them be happy, but the solution always seems to be different," he says. "We are creative people, and there's always a desire to try something fresh and new, to launch new franchises. But, for example, do we leave *StarCraft* behind for five years while we move on, or do we hire a third party to help us? That was our solution for *Ghost*, and it's working out well."

Pardo says *StarCraft* was the team's way of creatively branching off from *Warcraft* and into

a fresh new world that *Warcraft* fans could still appreciate. With *Warcraft III*, the team returned to familiar territory, but in unfamiliar ways. Producing the studio's first 3D game was a great challenge, and the team took the opportunity to improve the classic Blizzard presentation. But if anything characterizes the Blizzard way of making games, it's the ability to make tough decisions.

"When you're three years into a game, putting in 16-hour days, and maybe you haven't seen your family in three days, you get to a point where you just want to get the game out the door," Pardo says. "But what happens around here is that we tend to make the hard decision not to take the short out when the project hits a wall. What it comes down to is that for a couple more hours, we validate the entire last three years." ☞

A Star Is Born

The early concepts for *Ghost* involved putting players on the ground in a full 3D version of the *StarCraft* universe. But those plans changed radically.

"We chewed on this a while," Lagrave says. "Cool missions and blowing up stuff were always in there. But who do you play as? We toyed with space marines, but that's already been well done. So we went to the *Ghost* unit almost immediately as the foundation for the game. We agreed to make this badass chick that you can feel empowered by in playing her. As we looked at power in the new console boxes, we realized we could do this character, and this universe, on consoles."

And so Nova was born.



STARCADE

Game designers have never had a problem speaking their minds, but with help from Hollywood's biggest names, mainstream America might finally get the message.

For interactive-entertainment industry magnates, talk is cheap; for videogame producers, finding voice-acting talent, with the union-mandated \$1,000 minimum retainer, isn't. Recruiting a tabloid regular like Ben Affleck as the next Solid Snake only makes matters worse, because A-list stars can set any production house back a cool million. Ironically, shrinking budgets notwithstanding, today's most prolific videogame publishers seldom balk at such substantial cash investments. Whereas designers once viewed hiring Hollywood's

“FOR ME, DOING VOICEOVER WORK IS A LOT OF FUN. IT’S SO DIFFERENT FROM BEING IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA.” —MICHAEL MADSEN

best and brightest vocal performers as a luxury, it’s become a routine part of the development process.

Take recent smash hits like *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, whose cast—including Ray Liotta, Tom Sizemore, and Dennis Hopper—is more solid than most movies. Given the market’s \$10.3 billion turnover and the sizable returns at stake, it’s no wonder competitors such as *True Crime: Streets of LA* responded in due fashion with contributions from the peerless Christopher Walken and Gary Oldman.

“Casting big-name celebrities adds value to a game by making it more authentic and credible,” says Lori Plager, senior director of brand development and licensing at Activision. “It also turns the [production] into something more cinematic...a mini-movie of sorts.”

Collaborations like *Call of Duty*, an atmospheric World War II first-person shooter starring the voices of Giovanni Ribisi and Jason Statham, illustrate how salient the merging of Hollywood and game developers is. But not everyone, including those who stand to profit most from these opportunities, has jumped on the bandwagon.

Lev Chapelsky, general manager of Blindlight, a Hollywood-based company that provides production services to all the major videogame publishers, sees no value in Hollywood voice talent and actively tries to steer clients away from hiring celebrities. “Right now, it’s more about ego glorification than anything else,” he says. “Our clients get a kick out of hiring movers and shakers.”

Ego seems a plausible explanation for the jarring cameos perpetrated by Fairuza Balk, Katey Sagal, and John Rhys-Davies in Sony Online’s *Lords of EverQuest*. Even so, manufacturers like Capcom, who’ll test the talents of French thespian Jean Reno with the upcoming action-adventure *Onimusha 3*, take odds with

Michael Madsen (opposite) appears as the voice of Tanner (right) in Atari’s *DRIV3R*.



TRIVIAL PURSUITS

Actors Secretly Star in Your Favorite Games

Big- and small-screen scions alike are given to flights of fancy. Witness a few of their more obscure starring roles:

Donald Gibb

Defining Role: *Ogre, Revenge of the Nerds*

Appears In: *Alter Echo*, playing the role of Gherran. Also played Floyd the bouncer in Activision's *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*—it wasn't much of a stretch.

Hayden Panettiere

Defining Role: *Dot, A Bug's Life*

Appears In: *The Mark of Kri* from Sony, where she stops bugging out by assuming the role of Tati.

Ron Perlman

Defining Role: *Salvatore, The Name of the Rose*

Appears In: Sony Online's *Lords of EverQuest*, Activision's *True Crime: Streets of LA*, and Interplay's *Fallout Tactics*. Presumably all are a step up from a forthcoming stint in the *Hellboy* movie.

William Hootkins

Defining Role: *Lt. Max Eckhardt, Batman*

Appears In: The forgettable *Evil Dead 2: A Fistful of Boomstick* from THQ, where he stars alongside Bruce Campbell, who could kick Michael Keaton's ass.

Ron Perlman voices Misha from *True Crime: Streets of LA*.

Dwight Schultz

Defining Role: *Capt. H.M. "Howling Mad"*

Murdock, The A-Team

Appears In: Such timeless hits as *Star Trek: Elite Force II* from Activision, *Blood Wake* from Microsoft, and *Tenchu 2* from Activision.



this assessment. Citing the convergence that now proliferates between entertainment mediums, the company claims participation in a gaming project by a high-profile actor can give it greater cachet with a mainstream audience.

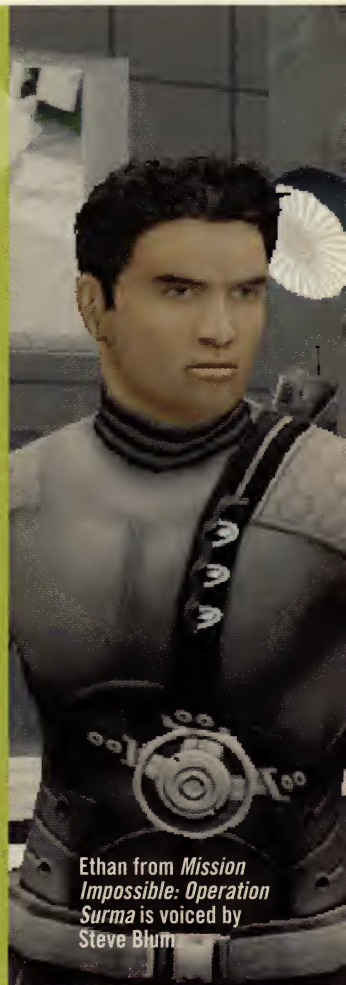
Heavy hitters like Microsoft and Sony agree. Serendipity alone doesn't account for *Beverly Hills 90210*-alum Ian Ziering scoring the role of hero Edison Trent in *Freelancer*, says Ed Fries, former head of Microsoft Game Studios. Like the executive's counterparts at SCEA, he credits cross-pollination amongst art forms with driving the mandatory evolution within the software business. Companies are pushing continually to establish recognizable brands and content, and pairing with celebrities—already defined as experts in certain fields—communicates these intentions to consumers. Insofar as these billion-dollar corporations are concerned, Michael Clarke Duncan's guest appearance in *SOCOM II* and Jet Li's starring turn as Kit Yun in *Rise to Honor* are just the beginning of a coming storm.

However, some of the industry's biggest luminaries caution against buying into the hype. A company spokeswoman for Nintendo affirms the pioneering hardware and software manufacturer's stance on

the issue: grudging acceptance and considerable skepticism. The firm has used and will continue to use Hollywood talent, she asserts. At the same time, Nintendo takes pains against letting voice acting overshadow play, believing that videogame characters, not those who vocalize them, should command the spotlight.

Certain third-party publishers such as Majesco agree. *Advent Rising* lead designer/director Donald Mustard flat-out refused to rely upon known personalities for player and NPC speech samples. "End users associate various voices with certain people," he says. "It can confuse the topic when you'd rather focus on developing a character's unique persona. Worse, you're locked into using that specific individual for sequels or spin-off properties, when the pairing won't necessarily make sense."

Furthermore, absolutely no hard evidence exists that such partnerships can prove fruitful under any circumstance, Chapelsky argues. "We don't push clients toward superstars," the matchmaker says. "It's dubious that there's a good return on investment there. Celebrities drive revenue in the field of gaming to a much lesser degree than in any other industry, be it movies, TV, or product advertising."

Tasia Valenza**Defining Role:** Dottie, *All My Children***Appears In:** *Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge* as Betty, who's apparently had enough of soap operas.**Tara Strong****Defining Role:** Baby Dill, *Rugrats***Appears In:** Metro3D's *Dinosaur Hunting*, which could explain why bawling like a toddler's no problem for her.**George Cheung****Defining Role:** Chinese Teacher, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me***Appears In:** *Enter the Matrix* from Atari, in which he gives a career-making performance as, ahem, Male Enemy #6.**Traci Lords****Defining Role:** Money Shot, *Erotic Zones Vol. 1***Appears In:** So many porn films, you'd need seven men's libidos to appreciate them all. Oh, and now-bankrupt publisher 3DO's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, if it ever sees retail.**Carlos Alazraqui****Defining Role:** Taco Bell Chihuahua, *Taco Bell advertising campaign***Appears In:** Holy guacamole, the man goes from promoting chalupas to random violence in Rockstar's *State of Emergency*, as Spanky. Hey, it's a step up.**Steve Blum****Defining Role:** Spike Spiegel, *Cowboy Bebop***Appears In:** *Mission Impossible: Operation Surma*, in the role of Ethan. Hmmm. Think Tom Cruise was a little too expensive for Atari's tastes?**Neil Ross****Defining Role:** Green Goblin, *Spiderman: The Animated Series***Appears In:** Two not-so-similar offerings: Tecmo's *Ninja Gaiden*, where he plays Doku, and *Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge* from Microsoft as Doc Fassenbinder.**Frank Welker****Defining Role:** Scooby Doo, *Looney Tunes: Back in Action***Appears In:** More games than you'd imagine, such as LucasArts' *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, Eidos' *Blood Omen II: Legacy of Kain*, and Interplay's *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*.**Cree Summer****Defining Role:** Winifred "Freddie" Brooks, *A Different World***Appears In:** A whole passel of titles that test her—cough—considerable talents, including Square's *Final Fantasy X-2*, Interplay's *Run Like Hell*, and Microsoft's *Freelancer*.**Mike Erwin****Defining Role:** Teenage Bruce Banner, *Hulk***Appears In:** The original *Jak and Daxter* from Sony, playing the former member of the all-too-annoying duo.

Ethan from *Mission Impossible: Operation Surma* is voiced by Steve Blum



David Duchovny's slick, laconic voiceover style in *XIII* was one of the cooler features in what turned out to be a disappointing game.

That's saying a lot, considering that negotiating the particulars of a celebrity-affiliated deal takes three months minimum and can result in countless contractual headaches. All too often, producers simply contact a major talent agency, such as International Creative Management (ICM) or William Morris, the rough equivalent of walking right into the wolves' den. Intimately familiar with product endorsement transactions, experienced Hollywood agents frequently orchestrate arrangements that weigh heavily in favor of the artist. Business obligations must be defined clearly in writing, which requires extensive research on a publisher's part; failing this, hidden costs involved in retakes, pickup sessions, and publicity appearances can skyrocket. Essentially, risks typically overshadow potential rewards.

Despite viewing matters from a different perspective, no one understands the magnitude of prospective pitfalls so well as the actors involved themselves. Says *Kill Bill* star Michael Madsen, who appears as the voice of Tanner in Atari's forthcoming *DRIV3R*, "Even game makers don't always know what they expect from you. When recording lines for *Grand Theft Auto III*, no one could tell me anything about the role, and I hadn't even seen the title in action. After finally

BIT PLAYERS

Once, They Were Celebrities. Now, They're Starving Videogame Voice-Actors.

Bruce Campbell

Claim to Fame: Hit pay dirt as Ash, the bumbling but loveable hero of the *Evil Dead* films. Last seen onscreen in *Bubba Ho-tep*, where he stars as an aging Elvis, battling an evil mummy who threatens a nursing home. All but guaranteed to see headlines again once inevitable suicide attempt occurs. Bets, anyone?

Notable Performances: Like you couldn't predict obvious role reprisals in THQ's *Evil Dead* series. Also on the entertainer's resume, lesser known appearances in *Spider-Man: The Movie Game* and *Tachyon: The Fringe*. Collectors can also find his voice lurking in Konami's *Broken Helix*.

Mark Hamill

Claim to Fame: Saving the galaxy from the evil Empire as Luke Skywalker in George Lucas' original *Star Wars* trilogy was a noteworthy feat. Resurrecting his career after being typecast by jumping into the voice-acting business? An achievement we'd label as miraculous for anyone besides an acting Jedi knight.

Notable Performances: Apart from practically every token title concerning a certain sci-fi franchise to which LucasArts holds exclusive rights? The actor stars as the headlining hero in *X2: Wolverine's Revenge*. Moreover, he does due diligence as Col. Kroitz in *Grandia Xtreme*, too, and even appears in *Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex*.

Antonio Fargas

Claim to Fame: The hat. The cape. The fishbowls that doubled as shoes. No self-respecting hipster could forget the veteran thespian's unforgettable performance as flamboyant pimp Flyguy in *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*. You also might have caught the ghetto entrepreneur as Elijah Mohammed in *Ali: An American Hero* or Leroy James from *Soul Survivors*.

Notable Performances: Always pushing the boundaries of his natural gifts, Fargas revisits the role of streetwise flesh peddler Huggy Bear in Gotham's *Starsky and Hutch*. *Driver 2* fans may recognize him as the voice of Detective Tobias Jones. Next time you're in LA, consider throwing some spare change into his cup.

Adam West

Claim to Fame: Holy cruel reality, Batman! During the 1960s, West earned his chops clobbering villains as the superhero's original TV double, after which his career petered. Years later, it received a new lease on life, and he's scored over 60 credited movie appearances, popping up in cinematic masterpieces like *Omega Cop* and *Return Fire*.

Notable Performances: Besides that stint where he stood on the side of the highway holding a "Will Work for Food" sign, starring in Ubisoft's *XIII* as the crotchety General Carrington was rather noteworthy. Nevertheless, we're sure the Dark Knight wouldn't mind your charitable donations.

Mr. T

Claim to Fame: The former WWE wrestler and *The A-Team* icon has undoubtedly seen better days, such as when he held the lead villain's role in *Rocky 3* as Clubber Lang. Imagine—suburban kids all over the States were getting Mohawks in the 1980s to be more like the former B.A. Baracus, who currently keeps himself knee-deep in gold chains by shilling for 1-800-COLLECT.

Notable Performances: Many predicted his recent return to the small screen, courtesy of Rage/Ubisoft's *Rocky* conversion, would be short-lived. Woe be unto the skeptics, however, who soon faced another Oscar-worthy performance—T's turn in MTV's *Celebrity Deathmatch*. Pity the foo' who doubts this able pitchman's ability to weasel additional videogame appearances in the future.

Antonio Fargas



getting a look at it, there were things I wish they'd mentioned to me...I might have had second thoughts about accepting Rockstar's offer." Suffice it to say the thespian left the experience disillusioned.

On the bright side, some public icons aren't in it for the paycheck alone and don't mind putting in a little extra work when necessary. "For me, doing voiceover work is a lot of fun," Madsen says. "It's so different from being in front of the camera. Plus, my boys love it."

David Duchovny might not sport such personal reasons for attaching his name to the games *XIII* and *The X-Files: Resist or Serve*, but he professes equal interest. "After doing several interactive titles and TV shows, you become comfortable with voiceover performances," he says. "So when a script like *XIII* plops into your lap, it doesn't matter that it's a game. If the story is strong, you want to be involved in the project."

Never mind that the degree of participation is, by tradition, limited. "When playing a videogame character versus doing a television show or movie, actors have much less control over the performance," Duchovny says. "You want to be a tool for the people involved in the title's development and want them to give you tips and guidance on how the individual should sound. It's something you do for the gratification of testing yourself, to see if you can truly exist within the context of a game as the creator pictured it."

Certainly, that vision is often grandiose, given that producers sport ambitious hopes for their productions. Take *Kingdom Hearts*, a sprawling RPG that incorporates characters from both the Square and Disney universes. Several notable actors, including Haley Joel Osment (Sora), Billy Zane (Ansem), and David Boreanaz (Leon), provided character voices.

It's not uncommon for the producers of less epic offerings like *Rayman 3*, which includes John Leguizamo as Globbox, and *Jak II*, featuring Max Casella (Vinnie from *Doogie Houser, MD*) as Dexter, to flaunt name-brand contributors. Even off-kilter strategy/role-playing hybrids such as *Gladius* advertise cameos by *ER*'s Linda Cardellini and *Smallville*'s Michael Rosenbaum, further evidence we're witnessing a gaming phenomenon.

According to Steve Allison, vice president of marketing for Atari, a game company that has worked with Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ving Rhames, and Jada Pinkett-Smith in the past, such change is inevitable. "The lines between forms of entertainment are blurring," he says. "It means the games business is maturing." Simply acquiring top-tier licenses isn't enough anymore, he says. "Sometimes making certain connections, as with professional actors, is necessary. If you're making a software product with a strong back story, the premise isn't much different than making a film...it just happens to be interactive."



"RIGHT NOW, IT'S MORE ABOUT EGO GLORIFICATION THAN ANYTHING ELSE... OUR CLIENTS GET A KICK OUT OF HIRING MOVERS AND SHAKERS."

**—LEV CHAPELSKY,
GENERAL MANAGER,
BLINDLIGHT**

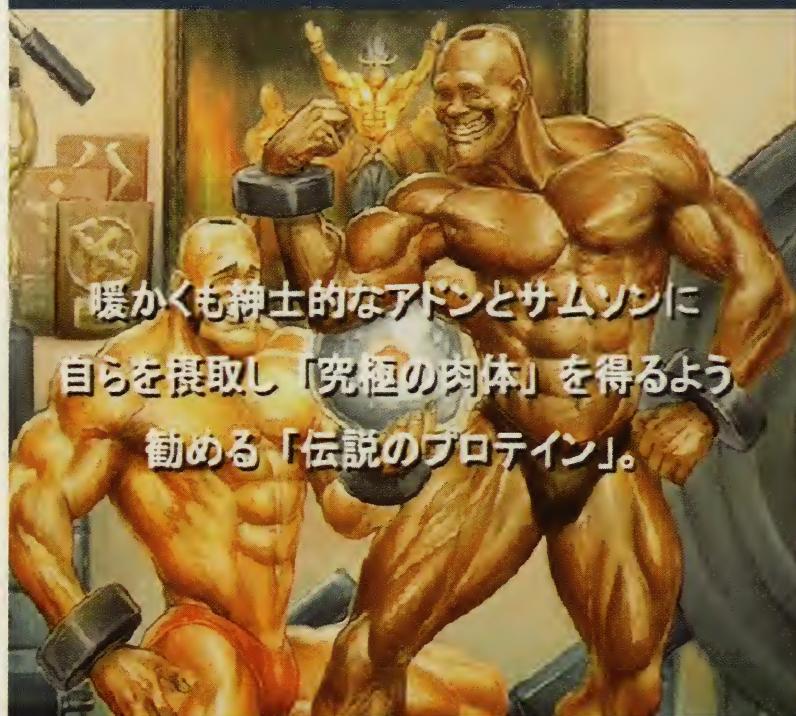
Wherever you stand on the debate, one thing is certain: Joint ventures between renowned voice actors and videogame publishers will become only more prolific. The kicker—we're all to blame. Says Allison, "As audiences become more sophisticated, production values will elevate. The pursuit of talent is going to become a must for interactive companies, concerning both licensed and non-licensed games, whenever a narrative component is involved. At the end of the day, the consumer demands it from us." ☺



OVERSEAS ODDITIES

**No, we're not making
this stuff up.** by Jon M. Gibson

While you might enjoy Americanized versions of games from the Land of the Rising Sun—like franchise favorites *Final Fantasy*, *Castlevania*, and anything Mario—there's a shadowy underground import market that remains mysterious to most. Welcome to the weird world of Japanese import gaming. Weak-stomached readers, consider this your warning: Bizarre, all-too-odd descriptions follow. Brace yourself.



Cho Aniki Seinaru Protein Densetsu

Genre: Homoerotic Shooter

Anyone with an urge to incinerate asteroids and blast alien scum could easily pick up a copy of *Gradius* and breathe easy, but how's a man-loving gamer supposed to get his kicks? Thanks to the *Cho Aniki* series—that's right, it's a franchise—homoerotic action is only a few button mashes away. Swap traditional spaceships for sweaty, steroid-beefed musclemen in Speedos, who groan and moan while shooting lasers from their veiny forearms.



Yakiniku Bugyou Bonfire!

Genre: Culinary Puzzler

As if working in the food-service trade weren't stressful enough, *Bonfire!* introduces an *Iron Chef* flavor to the proceedings. In this simulation/sweat-inducing riff, you have to please a wide variety of patrons, from green-haired rockers to sleazy businessmen, by feeding them fast. If you happen to undercook or char any of their meal, however, they'll more than likely keel over from a classic case of salmonella or just walk away in disgust. Mmmm... pixilated octopus pies.



Katamari Damacy

Genre: Trashy Strategy

Rather than tie up that overflowing Glad bag in your kitchen, why not just relax with a night of interactive garbage rolling? In *Katamari*, the art of trash collecting plummets to new lows when the King of Cosmo orders you, the not-so-illustrious Prince Toba, to clean up Earth by pushing massive balls of waste around town. Forget bodyguards and tinted limo windows—this is one surefire way to get the royalty-stalking paparazzi off your ass. Scratch n' sniff waste ID card sold separately. Well, not really.



Tensai Bit-Kun Guramon Battle

Genre: Scribble Brawler

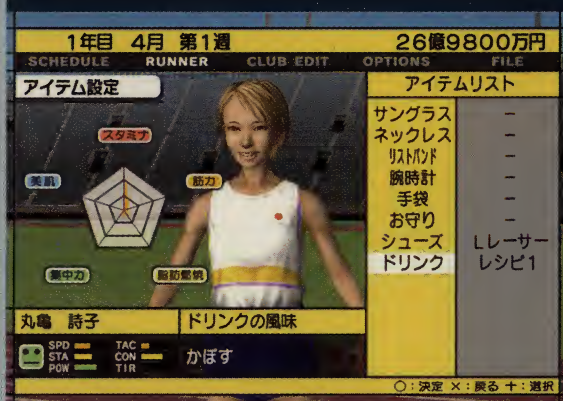
Pokémon fever was impossible to avoid, and Japan has plenty of other gotta-collect-'em-all games prepped to consume American youth, as soon as Yu-Gi-Oh!'s popularity starts to wane. Take *Guramon Battle*, a stadium-based battler where players create their own vicious monsters. With a nimble hand, you can literally draw anything with the game's scribble engine, including penis pals, bouncing-breast goliaths, and walking vaginal beasts. Call it unintentional porn if you like; your resources run as deep as the gutter in your mind.



Let's Run a Marathon

Genre: Jog-tastic action

If having Schwarzenegger in office isn't enough to get a pair of dumbbells in the hands of every child the world over, *Let's Run a Marathon* will surely get kids to jog a few extra laps, at least virtually. Olympic medallist Naoko Takahashi stars in this frantic, nonstop action game where you power up and... er... jog your way to glory. At a very slow pace. Lethargic, really. If that isn't boring enough for you, bypass the physical activity entirely and just manage her career from a safe, paper-shuffling distance.



Mojib Ribbon

Genre: Sadistic Musical

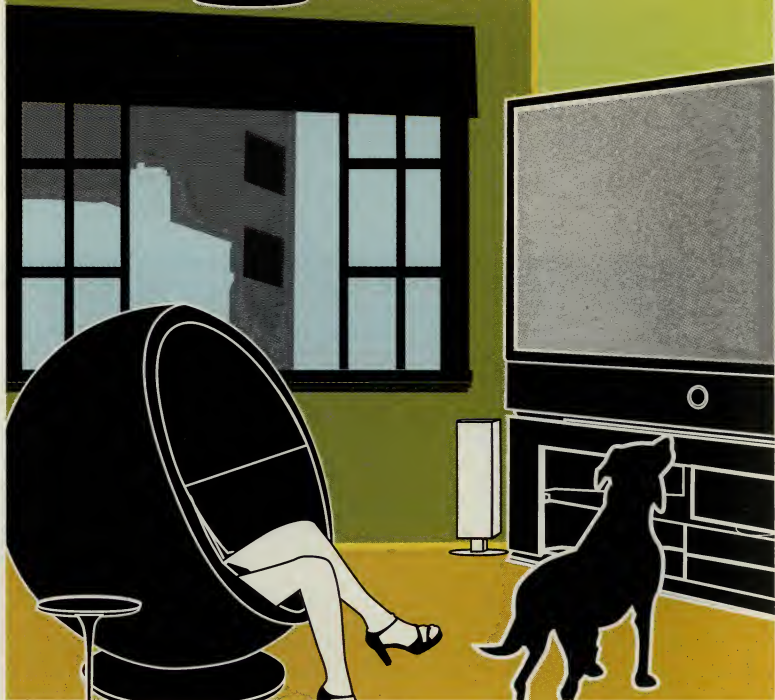
Practicing penmanship is an integral part of elementary school in America; in Japan, calligraphy is an art form that transcends age. Perhaps that's why the *Mojib* franchise is so popular. The masses had no choice but to fall in love with a game that couples the trance-inducing tradition of calligraphy with dubbed-in zany music. As a chubby, quirky lil' inkblot, it's your task to complete each string of hums by brushing in *kanji* symbols. Spilling the inkwell, however, is punishable by ten lashes with a sheet of rice paper. ☹



FENG SHUI FOR GAMERS

*Three sweet setups for
every stage of a gamer's life.*

by John Biggs



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COLLEGE DORM

Sony MDR-NC20 Headphones

Your weird roommate is bitching about his prof from hell, and your crunchy roommate (the one with Birkenstocks and dreds) is making tofu patties. Your senseless destruction of a funhouse in *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* doesn't fit the atmosphere, so you better grab your phones. These noise-canceling headphones from Sony will pull the plug on the whining and kill the sizzle of soy, drowning you in pure, delirious mayhem.

The MDR-NC20 reduces outside noise by 70 percent and can pump out from 16 to 22,000 Hz for 45 hours on one AAA battery. You can plug it into almost anything, including your Game Boy, when you want to truly escape your roomies and take those thrills to go.

■ \$179; www.sonystyle.com

Pyramat PM300

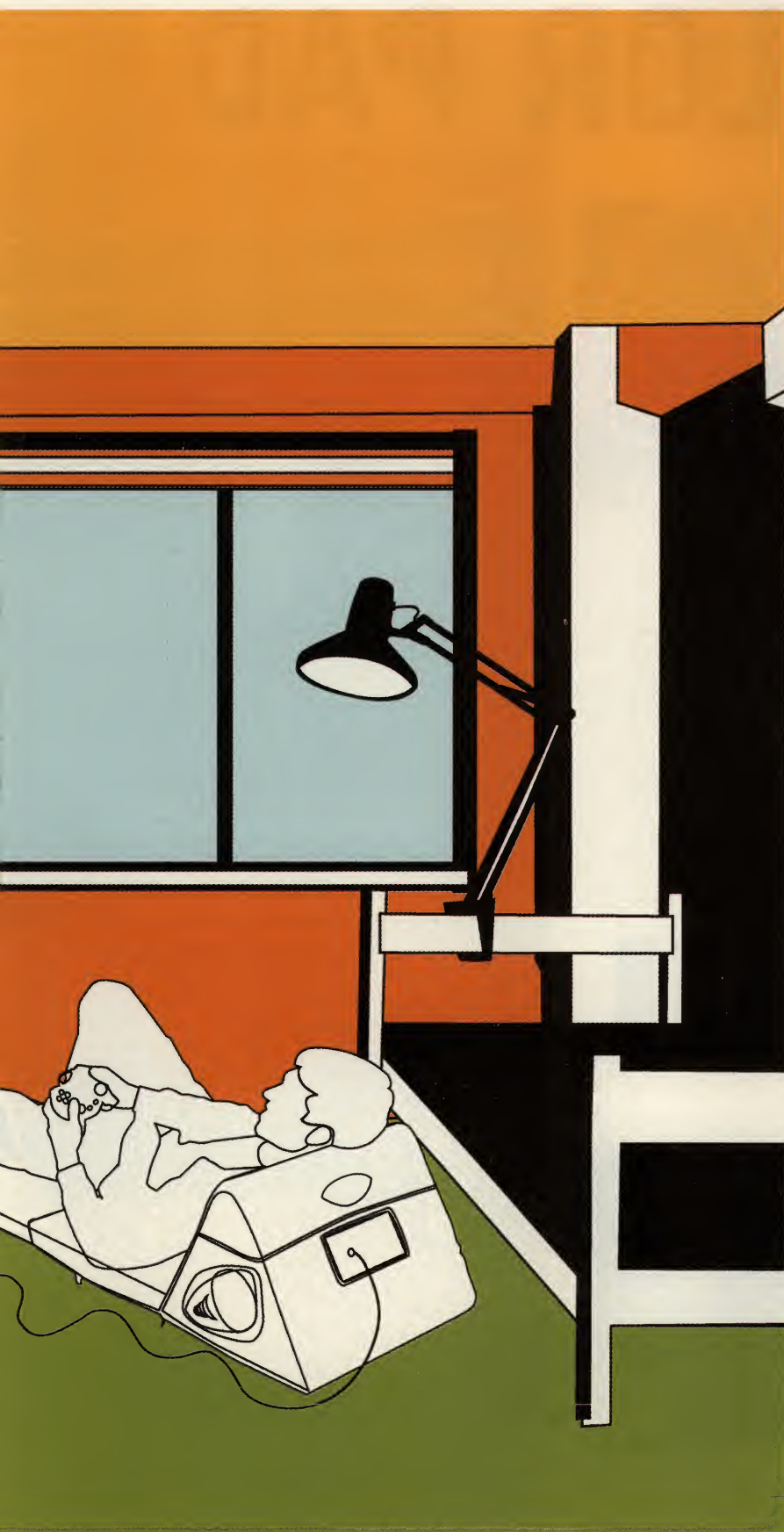
This is your damn chair, so everybody else, including the stinking dog, better stay the hell off. The damn thing has three built-in speakers and a 50W amplifier that will rumble your guts into a fine paste. To top it off, the soft PM300 is specially designed for maximum comfort for the sedentary gamer.

With a 50W amplifier, a high-performance subwoofer, and bass boost, the PM300 will let you feel the resonance of your grenade blasting your opponent into oblivion. The hand remote lets you adjust the level of sound to your liking during gameplay.

The PM300 is sheathed in attractive, stain-resistant nylon. You can wipe fluids and other effluents off with a damp cloth, and its oh-so-comfortable triangular backrest will reduce pressure on your catheter, allowing you to enjoy a full-week gaming marathon without having to use the restroom!

■ \$149; www.pyramat.com





Gateway 17-inch LCD TV

It's cheap. It's flat. Turn it over and use it as a drink tray. Smack it around a little and throw a controller at it when you fail miserably at *Super Monkey Ball*. Okay, scratch that last part.

The Gateway 17-inch LCD isn't quite HD, but it's good enough for now, and it sports VGA-in, so you can hook up your PC and surf the Web when you're not doing stuff for class.

Gateway is new to the TV market, so be nice to the new kid, especially since this TV tilts and swivels, has a great viewing range, and includes a built-in tuner.

■ \$699; www.gateway.com

Creative Inspire T2900

When the *Madden NFL 2004* tournament fires up, turn on the sound and blast the plaster off the walls with this 2.1 speaker set. The little remote control is perfect for strategic muting when your cell rings, and the small speakers pack quite a punch without burning out.

The small, chromed speakers produce a nice, heavy bass and great range. At less than \$100, it's one of the better budget-speaker sets out there, and you don't have to string 20 feet of cables underneath the beer-soaked rug.

■ \$59; www.creative.com



BACHELOR PAD

Egg Pod Speaker Chair

Break out the bong and the Pink Floyd albums, because this Egg Pod chair is going to take you back to a simpler time. Plug this lump of love into your receiver and have huge, pure sound pumped directly into your brain. Yes, this baby has two high-end speakers built into the headrest. All that's missing is a drink holder and a massager, but that's what the floor and the girlfriend are for, respectively.

These guys make each egg chair from scratch, so it's going to cost you. But with colors like mulberry and blue jay, these pods won't clash with the curtains, and the great shape lets you relive that scene from *Men in Black* again and again.

■ \$1,949; www.evofurniture.com



Panasonic SC-HT425D Home Theatre System

The HT425D's 700W of power, dumped out to six speakers and a fat subwoofer, should be enough for any discerning FPS aficionado. Add Dolby Pro Logic II decoding, CD/MP3/WMA/JPEG/whatever else playback, a shiny remote control, and a slim, progressive-scan, five-disc DVD player for those times when games are just not enough, and we're sold.

The SC-HT425D isn't a bottom-of-the-barrel multispeaker kit. This low-profile, matte-black set includes a thin subwoofer, wide center-channel speaker, and matching satellites for maximum aural pleasure.

■ \$699; www.panasonic.com

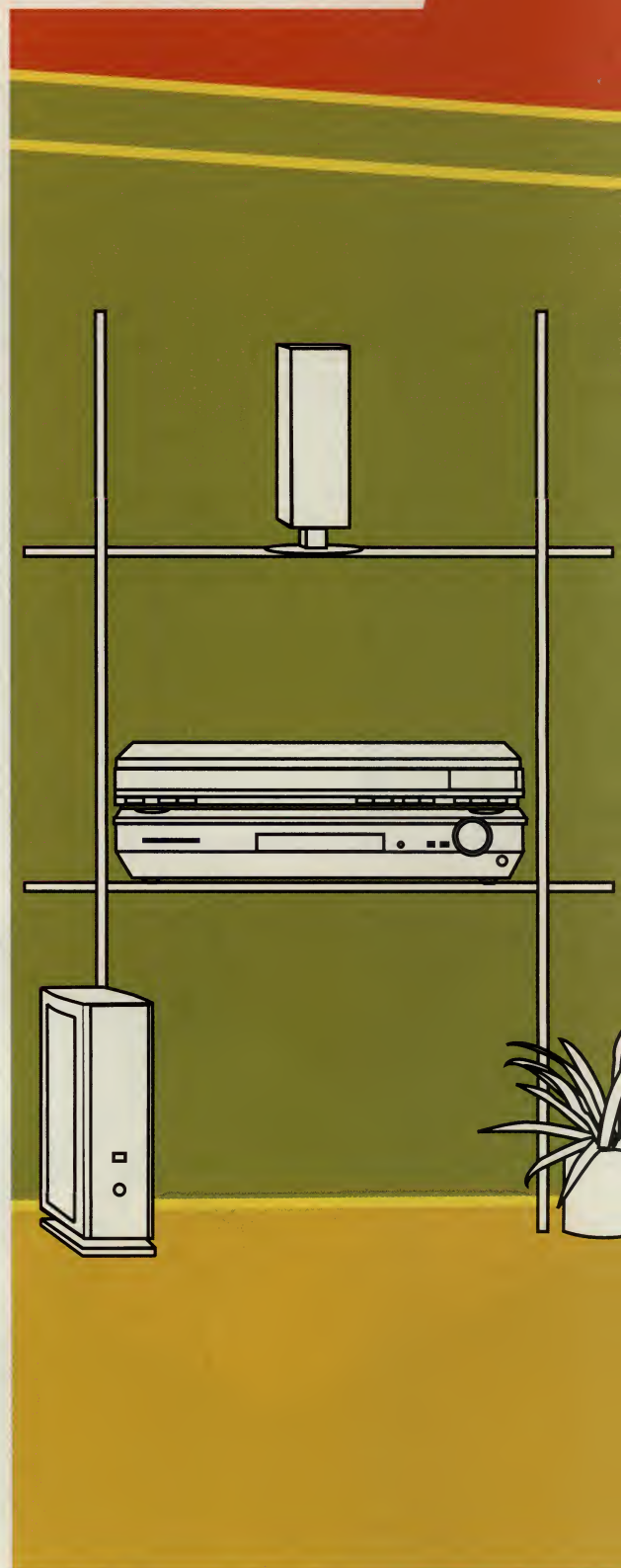


Samsung HLM437W 43-inch Projection TV

Get ready for some hot, high-def action; this Samsung TV is as sexy as it gets. Featuring built-in virtual surround sound, this 16:9 set is super sharp, plus its brushed chrome will match any décor, from late-modern Love Nest to underwear-on-the-floor Colonial.

The Samsung's slim bezel gives you more viewing room, and at 15.7 inches deep, you can stuff this into any corner you want. This über boob tube uses Faroudja's de-interlacing technology to ensure a smooth widescreen picture and beautiful HD playback. Just make sure you turn on the HD setting on your Xbox.

■ \$2,485; www.samsungusa.com





PENTHOUSE



Deco CinemaChair

Relive your first sweaty hand-holding session in these super-swanky theater seats. The Deco CinemaChair loveseat from Acoustic Innovations is the perfect arrangement for you and a significant other to beat each other into a pulp in *Soul Calibur II*. Finished in your choice of velvet, suede, or leather, the cushy chair features two—count'em, two—hidden rollout cup holders for your frosty beverages.

The deeply padded CinemaChair offers motorized recline—if you're so inclined. Each handmade chair can be customized in three widths and heights to maximize your comfort. If you're planning to work your way through a *Final Fantasy* RPG in one sitting, we recommend going for the heating and massage options, as well. Your game experience may never be the same again.

■ \$2,975 and up; www.acousticinnovations.com

Paradigm Reference Studio 100 v.3 Loudspeakers Surround Sound Kit

When your speakers cost as much as a used Chevy Malibu, you know you've got something sexy on your hands. These 81-pound monsters are intense, with three front-channel speakers, two rear speakers, and no subwoofer. The bass is created by heavy drivers in the individual stacks themselves, and the three seven-inch woofers separate the high and midrange tones without muddying up the sound.

Playing anything except Beethoven symphonies over these babies is probably a sacrilege to stuck-up audiophiles everywhere, but the bowel-loosening thrum of a chain gun through the 100s is like the voice of angels to us.

■ \$5,500; www.paradigm.com





NAD T163 Surround Sound Preamplifier NAD T973 Power Amplifier

Okay. This stuff is an audiophile's dream. The T163 is a surround-sound preamp, and the T973 is a separate amplifier that can pound out 140W per channel with input gain controls and gold-plated RCA inputs for superior-quality sound reproduction. This black-box double-threat is packed with enough high-tech sound gear to keep knob twirlers and tweakers busy for eons, yet it's easy enough for your grandma to use.

Priced considerably more than your car is probably worth, this sound equipment is for the truly obsessive—and truly rich—only. Who can stop you from dreaming?

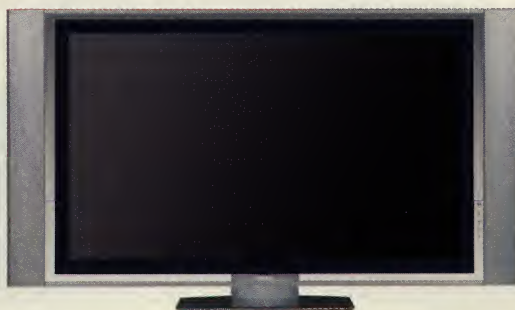
■ \$1,499 (preamp), \$1,999 (amp);
www.nadelectronics.com

Sony KE-42XS910

You haven't played *Tony Hawk's Underground* or *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* unless you've played them on this screen. It's wide, it's HDTV ready, and it features VGA-in, so you can brag about your new set via e-mail between kick flips and sword fights. Simply put, it's the best damn TV you can get, until you get another bonus at work and pick up a 60-incher, thereby banishing this 42-inch plasma to... we don't know... the bathroom?

The KE-42XS910's WEGA engine scales inputs to fit the screen perfectly, and it has great depth and an extremely impressive contrast ratio of 1500:1. Plugging our consoles into this thing was simple, and playing games in full HD glory was orgasmic. You haven't lived until you've been driven almost to vertigo-induced dry heaves while playing *F-Zero GX* on this beast.

■ \$6,999; www.sonystyle.com



Etiquette 101

Hey noob, want to stay in the game? Here's how to keep yourself in your opponent's good graces—before you frag them off the server.

Today, class, we're going to talk about etiquette, which is to say the conduct developed by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life. Now, I'm not talking about slurping your soup, chewing with your mouth open, or knowing which fork goes with which course. Today, we're interested only in the important, practical stuff: online-gaming etiquette. Everyone quit messing around and pay attention! You, in the back, spit out that gum. You there, with the "Romero is God" T-shirt, stop drooling on your desk and sit up straight.



You're tired of getting kicked off servers for acting like a "noob," aren't you? Don't sweat it. Everyone in the online-gaming scene had to start somewhere, and even the lamest gamer can be taught. Well, except maybe for the Romero guy. He's probably still waiting for *Daikatana* to make him its bitch.

Talk the Talk

Not knowing what's what online can get you ridiculed, if not mercilessly booted out of games by server admins with hair triggers. If you want to survive, you first must learn to communicate; for most games, that still means typing. Real-time voiceover Internet technology is steadily growing in quality, popularity, and accessibility, but it won't become the standard overnight. That means we must resort to pecking out messages to rap with your mates. Being able to spell helps, but hey, nobody's perfect, and much like with horseshoes and hand grenades, close usually counts. Ultimately, learning to type quickly and accurately (along with the judicious use of chat macros) can be the difference between virtual life and death.

If you are going to use voice technology, get yourself a decent microphone—don't cheap out. Substandard mics are excruciatingly painful for those on the receiving end, so at least check out some reviews before you buy. Logitech has several nice mic/headphone setups available. Keep your mic safely away from your speakers, as feedback can be a problem, even with quality gear. Speak clearly when you talk, don't yammer endlessly, and try not to yell too much. Bleeding ears and fun do not go hand in hand.

The last part of successful communication is learning the lingo. You're going to encounter some crazy technobabble out there, but you'll pick up much of the general terminology fairly easily. The Internet itself is the best place to get started. Check out some fan sites of the games you're into, cruise the forums, and see what you can learn. For the basic stuff and then some, Anarchy Online Vault (aovault.ign.com) hosts a MMORPG dictionary. If you're having trouble with the "leet" speakers, Ninjalane's L33t Dictionary (www.ninjalane.com/leet.aspx) might help you get a grip.

Play Nice With Others

Now that you're communicating up a storm with your fly typing skillz and all the latest jargon, keep a few general things in mind. Don't type in all caps; that's considered yelling, AND IT GETS ANNOYING FAST. Another irritant is spamming—repeating the same



thing over and over again—so take it easy. A lot of games allow players to vote on things like the next map or kicking off disruptive players, but calling votes all the time is a no-no. Consider this a privilege to be used appropriately: like for the guy who blinds his own team at the start of every round with a flashbang. If you're playing a game that involves a lot of loot, don't snatch everything up for yourself. Be good boys and girls like your momma taught you and share with your new virtual friends.

Team play is a big part of online gaming, and being a good teammate can score you major brownie points. Right off the bat, don't stack the teams by joining the one that's dominating or that already has more players. In games with different characters or classes, choose one that is complementary, not redundant, no matter how much you love it. Your team doesn't need an eighth sniper lining the ridge while one troop is left to capture the flags. If friendly fire is enabled, remind yourself that it exists to make the game more fun and challenging, not so you can pop your buddy in the coconut when he's not looking. It's hard to resist, I know. Try. Hard. Just because you're a noob doesn't mean you have to act like one. Save those activities, like writing your name on the

wall in bullets, for your "special time," when you and your computer get to be alone—when the lights are dimmed, and the music is just right...

Cheaters Never Prosper

Most of this is Golden Rule, do-unto-others, common-sense kind of stuff, attributes that aren't always all that common. In fact, a lot of monkeys out there have very little, if any, kind of sense. These e-tards wield the innate anonymity of the Internet like a

A surefire way to get booted is by spamming up a storm.

"REMINDE YOURSELF THAT FRIENDLY FIRE EXISTS TO MAKE THE GAME MORE FUN AND CHALLENGING, NOT SO YOU CAN POP YOUR BUDDY IN THE COCONUT WHEN HE'S NOT LOOKING."

sledgehammer, doing their best to get their kicks exclusively at the expense of others.

What can you do about it? Electronic Art's Dave "Orbeus" Abelt, Online Account Administration Manager for Ultima Online, offers some tips, as well as a few choice warnings. "Tools such as profanity filters, ignore lists, and secure trade windows allow players to avoid many of the normal grief tactics," he says. These kinds of tools have become common in most big online games, as have in-game mechanisms for reporting anything shady to the powers-that-be.

When the shenanigans escalate to the next level, Abelt recommends using these mechanisms and putting as much virtual real estate between you and the hooligans as possible. Employ the theory that if a griever grieves in the forest, and there's nobody there to hear it, who the hell cares?

Those of you inclined to dispense your own brand of street justice need to cool your vigilante asses down. "Trying to get back at a cheater or griever may end up getting you in trouble with the GMs," Abelt warns. "The penalties can range from a verbal warning all the way to account termination. It all depends on the severity of the offence and/or the preexisting negative marks on that player's

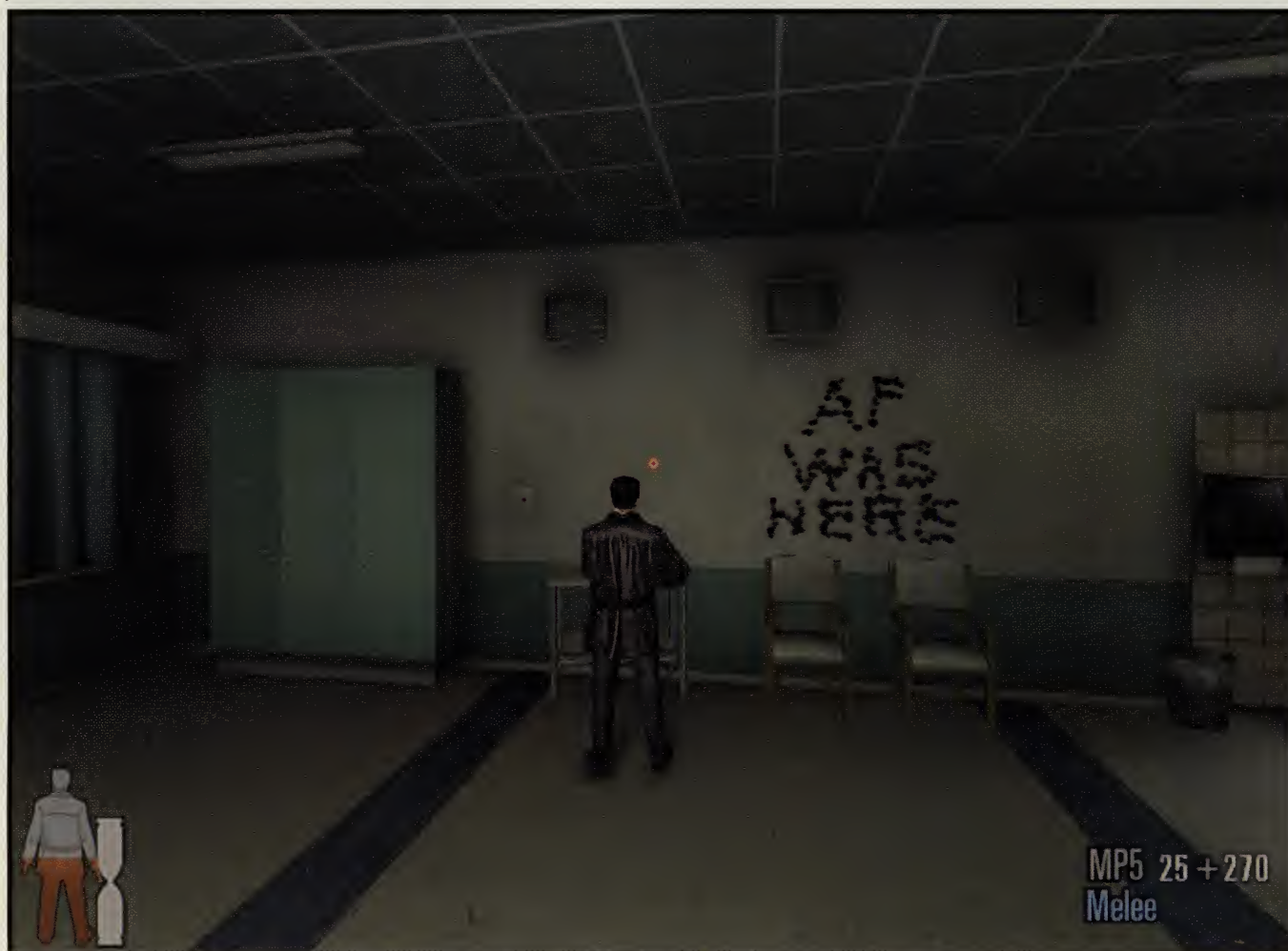
account at the time of the penalty."

EA isn't alone in cracking down. Blizzard, in particular, bans hackers and other offenders from their Battle.net servers by the tens of thousands. Even something as seemingly innocent as using a third-party application can get you in hot water now. Unapproved apps usually violate those lengthy Terms of Service that nobody bothers to read, meaning they could cost you your right to play the game at all. Some of these apps contain Trojans and other nasties used by real hackers to steal your account information, so check an official source for what's legit and watch your back.

Class Dismissed

Don't get too defensive; most people just want to play, hopefully kick a little ass, and have a good time. Patience may not be in great supply online, but if you come prepared and try to play the game right, most people will give you the benefit of the doubt about being new and forgive you for not digesting everything there is to know on your first day. So, do your homework, noob, remember what we learned today, and for Pete's sake, don't use your fish fork for salad. That's just plain wrong. ☺

Save these activities for your downtime; online, it's all about getting the job done.



3D On Your Cell

As cellular gaming technology makes the logical leap from 2D graphics, Superscape wants you to Swerve into 3D action.

Cell phone games are fun, fast, and relatively cheap. They're also pretty cheap looking, with the best titles delivering colorful but flat graphics reminiscent of the most average NES fare. UK-based software developer Superscape is about to add another dimension to wireless gaming with its Swerve technology, an engine that supports the new Mobile 3D Graphics (M3G) API standard that will be making its way into handsets from Motorola, Samsung, and Siemens. Swerve-enabled games are not far behind. We recently demoed Activision's *Street Hoops* and completely forgot we were playing b-ball on a tiny screen.

We asked Superscape's chief technology officer Paul Beardow to give us the scoop about his company's eye-candy innovation and when we can get our Swerve on.

How do you deliver 3D graphics on a phone, and what is the gameplay experience like?

The Swerve Client sits on the phone and implements the new 3D API, and this also encompasses a new file format also defined by the standard. 3D Scenes are built into tools like 3D Studio Max and then downloaded to the handset using this new file format. The API then allows programmers to write Java MIDlets that manipulate the scene and add in-game AI. Overall, the experience depends on the handset, but we are developing games that get pretty close to PlayStation One quality in terms of visuals and gameplay.

Does the device require a lot of memory or a special graphics chip to handle Swerve?

We can take advantage of any hardware acceleration if it's there, either as a DSP [digital signal processor] or as a dedicated 3D accelerator chip. For a good game, we see a base platform as having 100-MHz ARM9 or equivalent and 1.5MB to 2MB of RAM available for the application. Obviously, more RAM or a faster processor means that you can have richer content.

Will Swerve-enabled games take longer to download?

The biggest bottleneck is usually the network. These games have to be around 200K to fit the download capabilities of data-capable networks that are already deploying gaming content. 3D content isn't that big, but we have some additional technologies that help here. Handsets matching these requirements are in the market today and will be very common in 2004.

Can you tell us about any titles that will be debuting this year?

We currently have about 25 titles in various stages of development that will hit the market this year.

We have announced

S.W.A.T. and *Street Hoops*, but there is also *Moto GP* and some in-house titles that we are showing on www.swervepowered.com. Availability is really dependent on when handsets ship. We expect to see these games on BREW first, then Java handsets, but NDAs prevent me from saying much more than that.

Has Superscape developed its own games?

We develop a few games in-house, but mostly we work with a close group of development partners. Quality is the key here; as with any new platform, the lead titles need to really capture the public's imagination.

What phone makers and carriers are making Swerve-enabled titles available?

We have announced deals with Motorola, Samsung, and Siemens for the Swerve Client, so expect to see games on their handsets when [they are] released. Since JSR-184 is a global standard, our games will also run on other handsets that implement this standard, even if the engine isn't ours. As for carriers, I can't disclose that at the moment, but this will be mainstream technology.

Do you know if these downloads will cost more than regular Java games?

That's quite hard to tell at the moment. Obviously, they are more attractive than 2D titles, and there are signs in Japan that consumers are willing to pay more for a 3D title, but the real answer is that it depends on a number of things: the depth of the game itself [i.e., how many levels, etc.], the brand associated with it, and so on. I personally think people will be willing to pay more once they see the quality of what Swerve offers.

What's next for Swerve 3D technology?

We are working hard on enhancing the engine and tools, porting to more handsets, and supporting different types of hardware acceleration. The M3G standard allows us to enhance Swerve and still stay compliant with current handsets, so we'll also be talking a lot with our developers to see what they would like incorporated in the next releases. ☺

—Mark Spoonauer



"WE ARE DEVELOPING GAMES THAT GET PRETTY CLOSE TO PLAYSTATION 1 QUALITY IN TERMS OF VISUALS AND GAMEPLAY."

Metroid: Zero Mission

There and back again, a retelling of Metroid

Publisher
Nintendo

Developer
Nintendo

Genre
Action

ESRB
E

Format
GBA

Rating
8

GBA

Samus Aran's latest mission sheds some light on how she came to don her Varia suit and oversized helmet, but it's not the well-rendered and revealing cut scenes that makes this game worth the seven-plus hours it took us to finish. It's the great combination of shooting, rolling, jumping, and puzzle solving that will keep you glued to your Game Boy.

In classic *Metroid* fashion, you start with only a short energy beam and gradually add abilities and weapons, opening up previously locked areas of the game. Among the cooler powers is the aptly named Screw Attack, which zaps enemies while you're somersaulting and eats through pesky walls. We also like the Speed Booster, which lets you blast through some barriers and passageways; oftentimes the game forces you to get

a running start from an adjacent screen and shoot at obstacles while you build up steam. That's the genius of *Zero Mission*; you have to think about how best to use your powers in order to advance. The only truly new trick is the ability to hang from ledges, which allows you to aim and fire with one hand.

Like the original, the spirit of exploration that runs through *Zero Mission* keeps things relatively fresh. The gameplay actually feels more circular than linear, as you're often revisiting areas that you couldn't do much in before without needed items.

As for the boss battles, most are by the numbers, with the exception of your mano-a-mano with Mother Brain. She's not particularly intimidating, but it takes a lot of focus to crack her oversized glass tank and poke her in the eyes with your missile while dodging laser canons and myriad floating circles that sap your energy.

Even more surprising is the fact that this Mother is not your ticket to the end credits. You'll have to start from scratch with only a stun gun at your side in a mission on Chozodia, where you'll have to find your suit, battle a mechanical beast, and escape before your world collapses around you. We found the countdown timer both after the Mother Brain battle and this one to be particularly nerve-racking—in a good way.

In the end, *Zero Mission* rewards you with a classic version of *Metroid* for having completed your mission. Compared to the richer graphics, deeper soundtrack, and better storytelling in this game, however, you'll abandon your sense of nostalgia for another run through the remake in about 30 seconds. If you want a remake with intelligence, *Zero Mission* is number one. *—MS*



preview

Ice Nine

In coldest blood

With a name like *Ice Nine*, you know that you're going to need something cool inside your veins to master this fast-paced and surprisingly sophisticated first-person shooter for the GBA. If you're having trouble following, the answer is ice.

You're Tom Carter, a CIA operative called upon to stop the Ice Nine computer virus from spreading. At your disposal, you've got ten weapons and gadgets, including night-vision goggles and a sadistically fun sniper rifle, which takes advantage of the GBA's shoulder buttons.



Publisher
BAM! Entertainment

Developer
Torus Games

GBA

Press the R and L buttons simultaneously, and your view changes to the scope. Zoom in

and out with R and L and fire with the A button, using B to jump on top of random boxes.

But enough about buttons. *Ice Nine* moves quickly, bringing you from the CIA's training grounds to the streets of the nation's capital. We never got past "The Farm," as our early version of the game prevented us from saving our progress. That's a shame, because we were looking forward to graduating past target practice to the more stealthy missions.

What we can say about *Ice Nine* is that the graphics are blocky, but nice and gory (your shotgun blows bodies in half), and the soundtrack that plays between missions is appropriately overdramatic, even if the in-game sounds are a little spare for our tastes. If you want to rack up a body count while waiting for your laundry to dry, *Ice Nine* is pretty cool. *—MS*

Take That, PSP!

Nintendo's dual-screened portable will probably turn heads. But will you buy one?



GAME BOY VAPORWARE?

While the upcoming Nintendo dual-screen portable is under wraps, rumors are circulating that this system could be the Game Boy Enhanced, a device that plays both Game Boy and GameCube titles.

This month, we were all set to spill the beans about the rumored Game Boy Enhanced, a hybrid GameCube/Game Boy that purportedly handles both the former's smaller, shiny discs and the latter's rectangular cartridges in one killer combo. But then, just as Nintendo claimed to know nothing about this rumor, it announced a new, dual-screen portable game system that will be released this fall, and it's generating quite a bit of buzz. Most of it, however, is negative. Visions of a two-headed Game Boy leave most people scratching their heads.

Without actually having seen the Nintendo DS, we're reserving judgment until we get one in our hands at E3. But at this point, we're as perplexed as we are intrigued.

Let's start with the known facts. The DS's foremost features are its two three-inch TFT LCD panels, which, according to the big N, will add a new dimension to mobile gameplay. In an RPG, you'll be able to check your map, inventory of weapons, and other goodies without having to interrupt the action—no more constant switching between screens. In a racing game, one of the LCDs can serve as a rearview mirror.

According to one unofficial report, the two displays—each the size of the current Game Boy screen—will sit atop one another. We question how structurally sound such a design will be and whether multiple hinges could be involved. We also wonder how many developers will be willing to create titles for an entirely new platform to take advantage of the DS's split perspective. Nintendo has already confirmed that follow-ups to the Game Boy Advance and GameCube are in the pipeline, and developers may feel that less effort (and dollars) can be put out creating games for these known entities.

Reports speculate that the system will pack up to 1GB of internal memory and will have two processors (an ARM9 main processor and an ARM7 subprocessor) under its hood. Nintendo has not released any details regarding what format the games themselves will take, but given the amount of built-in storage, titles could conceivably be downloaded to the device.

Unlike Sony, which has been touting the PSP as "the Walkman for the 21st century," Nintendo seems to be setting its sights lower with the DS, calling it "a unique entertainment experience for the 21st century."

A dual-screen portable has intriguing possibilities. The question is whether the games will be as innovative as the hardware, and whether there will be enough of them to justify the investment. ☺

—MS

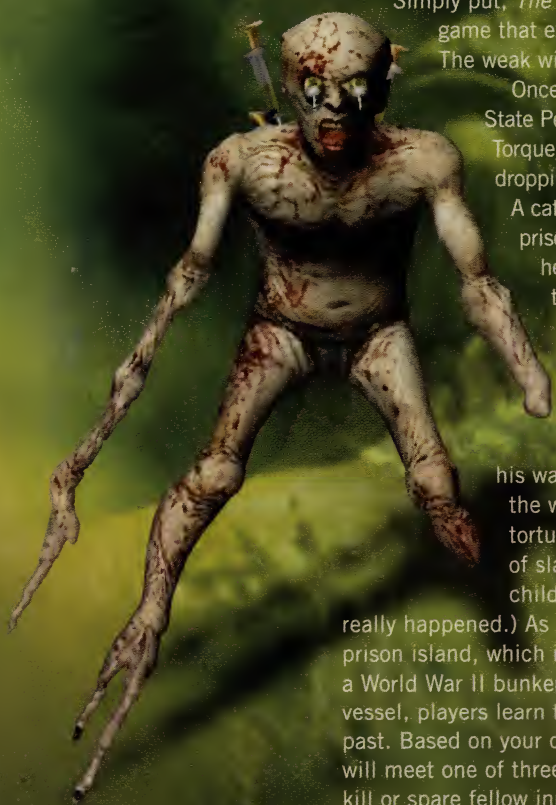


An essential part of every gamer's diet.

The Suffering

The big house of horrors

Publisher Midway | Developer Surreal Software | Genre Action Horror | ESRB M | Format PS2, Xbox



Simply put, *The Suffering* is a gruesome horror game that excels in all the right places. The weak willed need not apply.

Once the cell door closes on Abbott State Penitentiary death-row inmate Torque, he has more worries than dropping his soap in the shower. A cataclysmic event shatters the prison's walls and unleashes a hellish horde of demons upon the unsuspecting guards and inmates. Survival is the name of this game.

Armed with weapons ranging from a shiv to a shotgun, Torque must fight his way through the demons, all the while dealing with his own tortured past. (He was convicted of slaughtering his wife and children, but only he knows what really happened.) As he works his way around the prison island, which includes an insane asylum, a World War II bunker, and a shipwrecked slave vessel, players learn the truth behind Torque's past. Based on your decisions in the game, Torque will meet one of three endings. Your willingness to kill or spare fellow inmates and prison guards is a decided factor in Torque's fate.

The Suffering carefully balances simple puzzle



scenarios with all-out action to keep the gameplay fresh. The right analog-stick-based

camera system takes some getting used to, but once you catch on, you'll be creating demon bloodbaths left and right. Torque can morph into a demon and wreak havoc on his enemies, once his insanity level reaches the breaking point.

While *The Suffering's* ultraviolence carries the action, the plot questions the value of violence as a correctional device and explores the warped effect it has on the people who deliver and receive punishment.

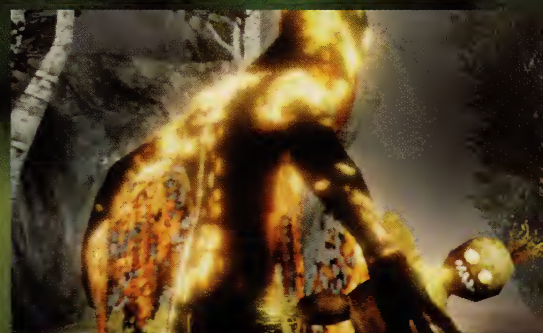
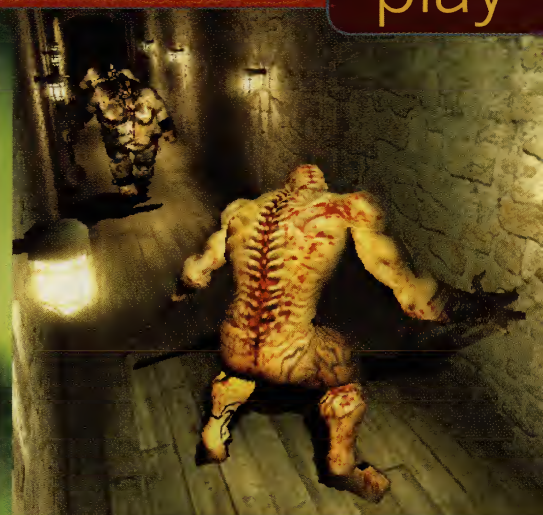
The artistic direction reinforces this message. The frightening enemy creatures have suffered the various forms of execution practiced at the prison (electrocution, lethal injection, hangings, et al). They are terrifying exaggerations of the most inhumane acts of institutional violence. The prison's dimly lit environments and creepy score of creaky cell doors and distant footsteps create a spine-chilling atmosphere on par with horror classics like *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*.

Overall, *The Suffering* delivers entertaining gameplay with a more psychologically engaging plot than your standard horror romps. A tour through this big house of horrors is definitely worth the price of admission.

—Matt Bertz

GAME
OF THE
MONTH

Rating
9
10



.hack Part 4: QUARANTINE

.crap

Publisher Bandai | Developer CyberConnect | Genre RPG | ESRB T | Format PS2



With the release of *QUARANTINE*, the videogame world's first serial RPG reaches its end, which prompts the burning question: Was the story of *.hack* so epic in scope, and the gameplay so revolutionary in design, that it justified a quadrilogy? Or did Bandai just chop a single, husky RPG into four pieces so it could charge four times as much for it?

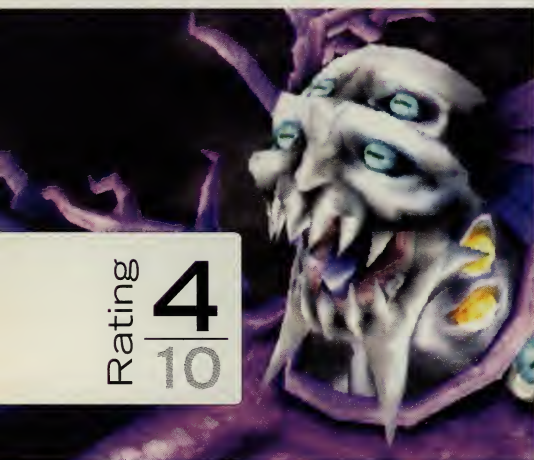
If you've played any game in the *.hack* series, you've played them all: lots and lots of hack-and-slash combat and too-infrequent advancements in its convoluted, ghost-in-the-machine storyline. It's like playing an online RPG, only the combat is more random and you can't chat with other players. The monsters are tougher in *QUARANTINE* than in previous entries, but so are your characters, so it doesn't add any challenge to the gameplay.

Bandai's English translation of the Japanese dialogue doesn't help matters, either, frequently stumbling between colloquial English and VCR-manual "Engrish." Since the gameplay is identical to earlier entries—and just as repetitive—it's the storyline that has to keep the player interested, but that doesn't happen here or in any of the *.hack* games.

The *.hack* RPGs are just one arm of a multimedia empire, and you're not really getting the *.hack* "experience" unless you buy all the anime DVDs and comic books, too. Maybe the plot of the game makes more sense when you have all the background from these sources to draw upon, but I'm not about to spend another \$100 to find out, and neither should you.

If you've already invested 60-plus hours in parts uno, dos, y tres, it's too late to cut your losses. You might as well hack and slash through *QUARANTINE* and put yourself out of your misery. The rest of you, however, should opt for any number of PlayStation 2 RPGs that value quality over quantity.

—Zach Meston



Rating
4
10



The Rating Game

We hired a top team of think tank intellectuals to devise the Best Rating System in the World. After reading the 300-volume work we paid them millions of dollars to create, we canned that calculus-ridden crap for the 0 to 10 point scale. Those responsible for the report have been sacked.

While rating the game, we take into account the graphics, sound, replay value, gameplay, and story. The final score is a reflection of the total game experience.

10 The Holy Grail, la pièce de résistance, everything you wanted it to be and more, etc.

9 A great game by any standard, though not the best of its kind. If this game were a quarterback, it would be Dan Marino—great numbers, no championship ring.

8 The "controversy" rating. Hardcore genre fans may scream bloody murder that the rating isn't higher, and passive gamers may think the game doesn't deserve the rating.

7 A solid effort that lacks any real innovation, or an innovative game that lacks a solid gameplay experience. Take your pick.

6 You may get a few solid hours out of this game during a rental, but it's definitely not worth 50 bucks.

5 to 3 The "irony" rating. The game is so bad it's gone past good and back to bad again.

1 & 2 Poking a dead rat with a stick would be more entertaining.

The Executioner

Every so often a game that should have been stillborn slithers its way to store shelves, ready to prey upon unsuspecting victims.

The Executioner is here to return the game from whence it came.



ESRB Ratings

EC- Early Childhood

You know—unicorns, rainbows, and other things that entertain and educate little rug rats or Japanese teenagers.

E- Everyone

This is a family-friendly game with an abundance of wholesome fun. Some parents call these games "babysitters."

T- Teen

These games have been known to crack one or two skulls along the path to victory.

M- Mature

Hookers, drugs, bloodshed, and sailor talk all rolled into one firebomb of a game. Long live the American Dream.

AO- Adults Only

Reserved for only the raunchiest of titles. The XXX of gaming.

RP- Rating Pending

Some aren't doing their job fast enough.

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II

Hack...and slash...and hack...and slash...

Publisher Interplay | Developer Black Isle Studios | Genre Action RPG | ESRB T | Formats PS2, Xbox

It's hard to define a "sequel" in the videogame world, since it can mean entirely different gameplay (*Final Fantasy X-2*), considerably enhanced gameplay (*GTA: Vice City*), slightly enhanced gameplay (*Dynasty Warriors 3*), or nearly identical gameplay with revamped audiovisuals (*Medal of Honor: Underground*).

With the cost of developing a videogame approaching the kajillion-dollar mark, most sequels tend toward the latter categories.

Enter *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II*, which provides the same nutritious breakfast of visceral monster slaughter as the original action RPG that blew console gamers' minds a couple of years ago.

A few changes and additions deviate from the original gameplay formula: The trio of characters has been replaced by a party of five adventurers, and a new item-creation system allows you to "make" your own weapons and armor by combining raw materials.

While other hack-and-slashers have improved on the genre's formula significantly (such as the four-player mode in *D&D Heroes* and the four-player online mode in *Champions of Norrath*), *Dark Alliance II* merely recycles most its gameplay.

Dark Alliance's graphics were mind-blowing in late 2001, but videogame graphics age in dog years, and by 2004's standard, *Alliance II's* visuals are very nice, which isn't good enough. The magic-spell special effects are slightly prettier than before; there are more outdoor, dungeon-mazy environments than



the original *Alliance*, and you can toggle between two slightly different zoom levels, but none of these affect the core gameplay.

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II is a satisfying hack-and-slash RPG, but it's just a member of the honor roll, not in a class of its own.



Rating
6
10

Champions of Norrath:

Realms of EverQuest

Will the real Dark Alliance II please stand up?

Publisher Sony Online Entertainment | Developer Snowblind Studios | Genre Action RPG | ESRB T | Format PS2

What the almighty Sony wants, Sony gets, and when Sony wanted Snowblind Studios, the developers of the dazzling *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, it spared no expense to acquire the services of the Seattle developer.

Champions of Norrath is the true sequel to *Dark Alliance* in everything but name, with similarities both great (top-down viewpoint, detailed auto-map, three-part energy meter) and small (flashy game-save special effects, potion bottles tumbling out of fallen foes).

The world of America's most popular MMORPG replaces the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* setting of *Alliance*, but this makes no difference to the gameplay; a magic fireball is a magic fireball, no matter its overly

elaborate name.

What the *EQ* connection brings to the mix is righteous, subscription-free online gaming in the form of four-

player, simultaneous adventures. The USB-headset support is a sweet touch, but it limits the online mode to broadband connections. Offline four-player action makes *Norrath* one of the rare nonsports games to use the PS2 Multitap.

Norrath pushes the PS2 hardware about as far as it can go, and sometimes beyond, as evidenced by rare bits of slowdown.

However, this game lacks the trademark NPC close-ups of *Alliance*, and that harms the storytelling; you never get a good look at the people chatting with you. Plus, for some reason, the characters in *Norrath* can't jump as they can in *Alliance*. It's never a good idea to take away gameplay depth.

Despite the quirks, *Champions of Norrath* is the PS2's best hack-and-slash RPG.

—ZM



Rating
8
10



Dead or Alive Ultimate

Test your technique outside the box

Publisher Tecmo | Developer Tecmo/Team Ninja | Genre Fighter | ESRB T | Format Xbox



You know online play has struck gold when old titles are re-released to take advantage of connectivity. *Dead or Alive 3* was a solid Xbox launch title, and Team Ninja apparently wants all its large-breasted combatants to live where X marks the spot. *DOA Ultimate* repackages the first pair of *DOA* releases with additional code for online play, but this version of *Dead or Alive 2* has been completely rebuilt with code on loan from *DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, almost making it a new game.

An endearing 32-bit throwback, the first half of *DOA Ultimate* is fun, but feels dated, especially since the updated version of *DOA 2* appears in the same package. As a Sega Saturn game most current players never got to experience, this is light entertainment.

It's the revamped *DOA 2* that will really turn heads. Since Team Ninja's day on the beach was little more than a titillating distraction, it's great to see the same tech applied to a tried-and-true fighter. Some purists will cry foul, lamenting that nothing was wrong with the original, but for most, the stunningly updated animations will be reason to come back to the fast-paced action.

Historically, fighting games don't translate well to online play (though *Capcom VS SNK 2* was an exception). Here, lag issues in the 3D engine prevent truly international play, but fighting opponents on your own continent is silky smooth. Straight-up matches, tournaments, and ladder rankings keep the fights simple and clean, and that's just fine. We're in it for the action and scenery, and both are beautiful.

—Russ Fischer



Rating
7
10

Delta Force: Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre

Scratching your itchy trigger finger

Publisher NovaLogic | Developer Ritual Entertainment | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PC



The long-running *Delta Force* PC game franchise bumped heads with Hollywood with the movie *Black Hawk Down*, which dealt with the United Nations' intervention in Somalia in the 1990s. The game was based on actual missions in Somalia by Delta Force, the US 75th Ranger Regiment, the 10th Mountain Division, and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Despite the use of real weapons and vehicles, gameplay was more arcade than tactical, which opened up this PC title to a wider audience. But NovaLogic turned to Ritual to develop the expansion pack.

Team Sabre whisks the combat away from the crowded urban streets and drops it deep into the jungles of Colombia and the desert oil fields on the coast of Iran. The game offers two new single-player campaigns; the Colombian scenario focuses on raids against drug cartels, while the unrelated Iranian campaign is an antiterrorist campaign.

With the open expanse, this game has a completely different feel in both the single-player and online gameplay. Gone are the linear objectives, in favor of open-ended missions with multiple means of achieving your goals, a definite gameplay

enhancement. Walk through a valley and you're suddenly in the center of an ambush, but navigate the hills and you can flank the enemy, taking them by surprise.

In addition to the ground troop movement, you get to have pure arcade fun on some levels. In one Colombian mission, you control a helicopter mini-gun and need to take out the region's radio stations. Like everything else in the game, you face consequences for your every action. Miss one station and you'll alert the enemy to your arrival. Take them all out and you retain the element of surprise. The single-player campaigns trump the original game, thanks to improved enemy AI. While the new settings are worth playing through once, they aren't worth repeating.

Team Sabre isn't the best-looking or most realistic war game on the market, but it delivers a fun diversion, especially in the multiplayer campaign. This expansion pack includes more than 30 new multiplayer maps.

As long as you're not looking for a realistic military simulation, *Delta Force* won't disappoint. If running around an active battlefield armed to the hilt, mowing down terrorists or drug henchmen is your idea of a good time, *Delta Force* is for you.

—John Gaudiosi



Rating
6
10

Deus Ex: Invisible War

A visible success

Publisher Eidos Interactive | Developer Ion Storm | Genre FPS/RPG | ESRB M | Format PC, Xbox

Many games aspire to Hollywood's concept of the "blockbuster," replete with endless explosions and shallow character development. The first-person RPG *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, on the other hand, bears the hallmarks of an engrossing novel, and that's a good thing. Set in a future 20 years beyond its acclaimed predecessor, this highly anticipated sequel boasts excellent writing, engaging gameplay, and good, if flawed, visuals.

Like the first *Deus Ex*, the game's chief selling point is that it enables players to solve problems in myriad ways. Don't feel like shooting your way into a hostile apartment complex? Try sneaking in through the air shaft or the skylight, or maybe just offer the janitor a bribe.

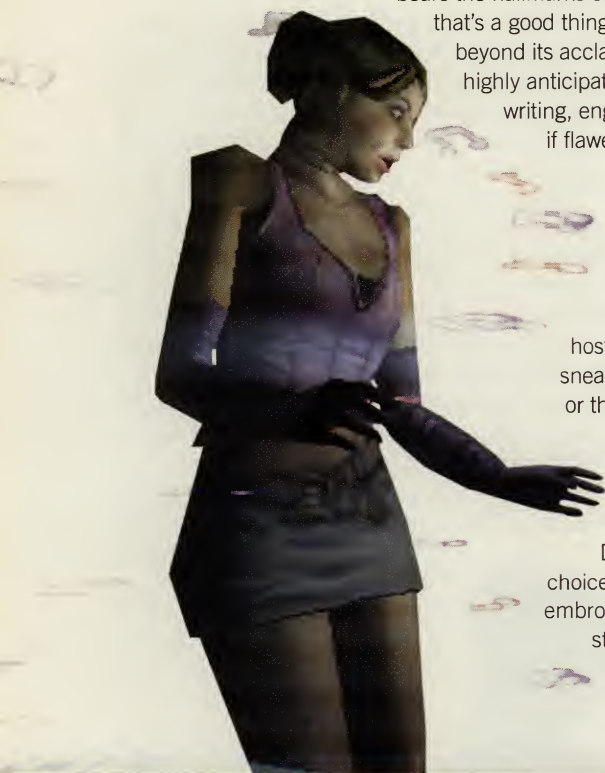
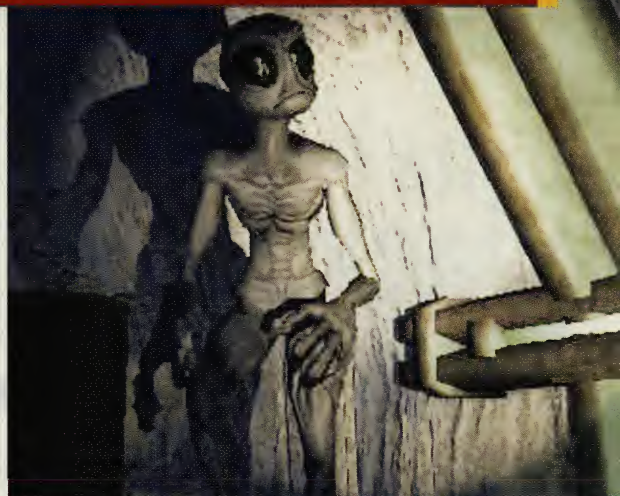
Spanning mostly urban environments, the sequel puts you in control of Alex D, male or female (your first choice of many), and immediately embroils you in a secret power struggle among multiple warring factions. Each faction will ask you to do its bidding, as will numerous

side characters, among them opposing coffee companies whose names, like real-world counterpart Starbucks, come from *Moby-Dick*. There's that literary influence again, in a game that encourages you to linger on the details, to learn characters' motivations by checking their bookshelves, and to think. Should you really assassinate that guy, steal that rail gun, or rescue that kidnapped pop star?

Play through the 12-hour game multiple times and you'll doubtless experience new scenarios, not just because *Invisible War* offers you different assignments, but because the game allows you to choose from a set of biomods (read: superpowers) that configure you as anything from a barrel-hurling brawler to a vampiric energy leech. (I was a sneak who sent drones to do my dirty work.)

The game is smart, but not smart enough. If Ion Storm is going to allow me to waltz into a man's apartment and steal the bread in his kitchen, it should program him to react. The other hitch comes in the frame rate, which hampers an otherwise sharp visual experience. That said, *Invisible War* is easy on the eyes and proves more insightful than most. Like a good book, once finished, you'll surely pick this one up again.

—Stephen Totilo



Rating
8
10



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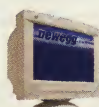


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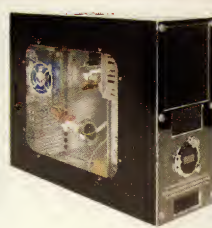


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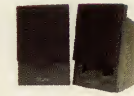


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Drakengard

Revenge tastes so sweet

Publisher Square Enix | Developer Cavia | Genre Action RPG | ESRB M | Format PS2

If you've always wanted to befriend a dragon to incinerate the countryside, *Drakengard* is your game.

The story follows Caim, a Union soldier thrust into action when the evil Empire kidnaps his sister, Freiae, and her fiancé. Hell-bent on revenge, Caim vows to save them, only to be wounded in battle. To save himself, he must join his soul with the Red Dragon and forsake his ability to speak. Together, they set out to unravel the deeds of the Empire, one scorched group of enemies at a time.

Blending great graphics with over 100 minutes of pre-rendered cinema to move the story, Square once again exhibits an attention to detail that steals the show. At its core, *Drakengard* is a *Panzer Dragoon*-meets-*Dynasty Warriors*-style hybrid that offers a unique blend of role-playing and action. Most of the game plays in real time, but you have the ability to level up your characters, as both Caim and the dragon grow and learn new skills.

Unlike *Final Fantasy X-2*, *Drakengard* is not very deep, but it mixes a good dose of hack-and-slash action with dragon-flying adventure. You can decimate and destroy anyone that gets in your way with the help of



your dragon, like in the movie *Dragonheart*. While you explore the game's various landscapes, you can either attack with your dragon's fiery blasts or dismount and take on enemies using any one of over 60 different weapons. Your dragon's lock-on breath of fire is outstanding, and charging up your magic meter to fire projectiles from your dragon's mouth is well worth the price of admission.

The game falls flat in its level design, as several levels sport the same terrain with only slight differences. While the voice acting is well done, the music will have you lunging for the mute button.

—Todd Mowatt

Rating **7**
10

Fallout:

Brotherhood of Steel

Falls flat

Publisher Interplay | Developer Interplay | Genre Action RPG | ESRB M | Format PS2, Xbox

Porting a PC classic to consoles is always an iffy proposition, so we give credit to Interplay for recognizing, in *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel*, that RPGs on an Xbox and PS2 play differently than they do on a PC. The great post-apocalyptic adventure gets totally remade, but into a merely passable action RPG for the living room. The setting, a retro vision of a wasteland, remains intact, including clever '50s-style newsreels that serve as cut scenes.

The RPG mechanics are dumbed down, but sufficient. You choose one of three characters, members of a brotherhood of do-gooders who keep order in the post-nuclear world of mutated people and beasts and marauding gangs. Characters in this hack-and-slash gain points for their battle prowess, which the player can dole out with a dozen or so attributes. The arsenal is entertaining, too, ranging from melee standbys like a spiked bat (great for smashing nearby furniture) or long-range guns and lasers.

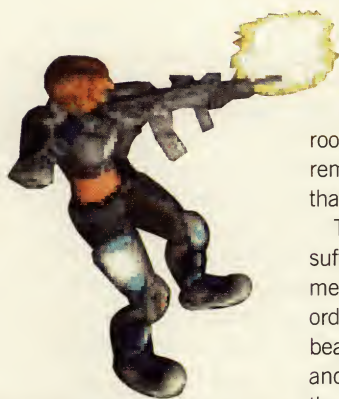
Fallout benefits from Interplay's solid *Baldur's Gate* action-RPG engine. The graphics are crisp on both Xbox and PS2, and the designers have created a believable set of gritty interiors and desolate exteriors to represent an irradiated world. You can cycle through one of three at-hand weapons for quick swapping, and the Stimpaks you pick up along the

way restore health. Our only interface complaint is that the superimposed game map is too limited. Some levels make it difficult to get a sense of the larger layout.

The real weakness of *Fallout* is its failure to immerse players; a well-imagined, post-nuclear title shouldn't have to work hard to keep your interest. The simple storyline has you seeking out fellow brotherhood members, and most of the challenges involve straightforward missions like clearing out levels. Plot points and decent puzzles punctuate the hack-and-slash gameplay, but only occasionally. In a strange design move, Interplay has chosen to gear *Fallout* toward mature audiences; most of the NPCs you meet spew profanity.

At best, *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* offers acceptable action, good graphics, and a nice game engine.

—Steve Smith



Rating **6**
10

Far Cry

Island vacation, FPS style

Publisher Ubisoft | Developer Crytek | Genre FPS | ESRB RP | Format PC

Ubisoft irrevocably changed console gaming with *Splinter Cell*, and *Far Cry* aims to revitalize the PC shooter in a similar fashion. The tools seem so simple: a white-hot graphics engine, robust multiplayer

action, and highly evolved AI. Marketing claims about the intelligence of NPCs are a dime a dozen, but *Far Cry* makes good on its boasts with subtly smart enemies. The AI creates the most compelling solo game since *Call of Duty*.

Waking tied up on your boat near a lush tropical island, you have to figure out what dangerous and obviously violent happenings led to your incapacitated state. Since this is a shooter, you face a great number of enemies while unraveling the mystery. But these guys have brains; the AI leaves scripted routines behind. Instead, everyone on the island has tasks to complete, and they'll do so, until they notice something out of the ordinary—like you.

The graphics engine came to life as a GeForce3 tech demo, and the pedigree shows. It capably renders absolutely gigantic environments with fidelity equal to the *Unreal II* engine, but bolstered by far better lighting. The incredible draw distance comes into play as you scan for faraway enemies, and the engine's power allows rag-doll animations to keep combat fresh, and even funny.

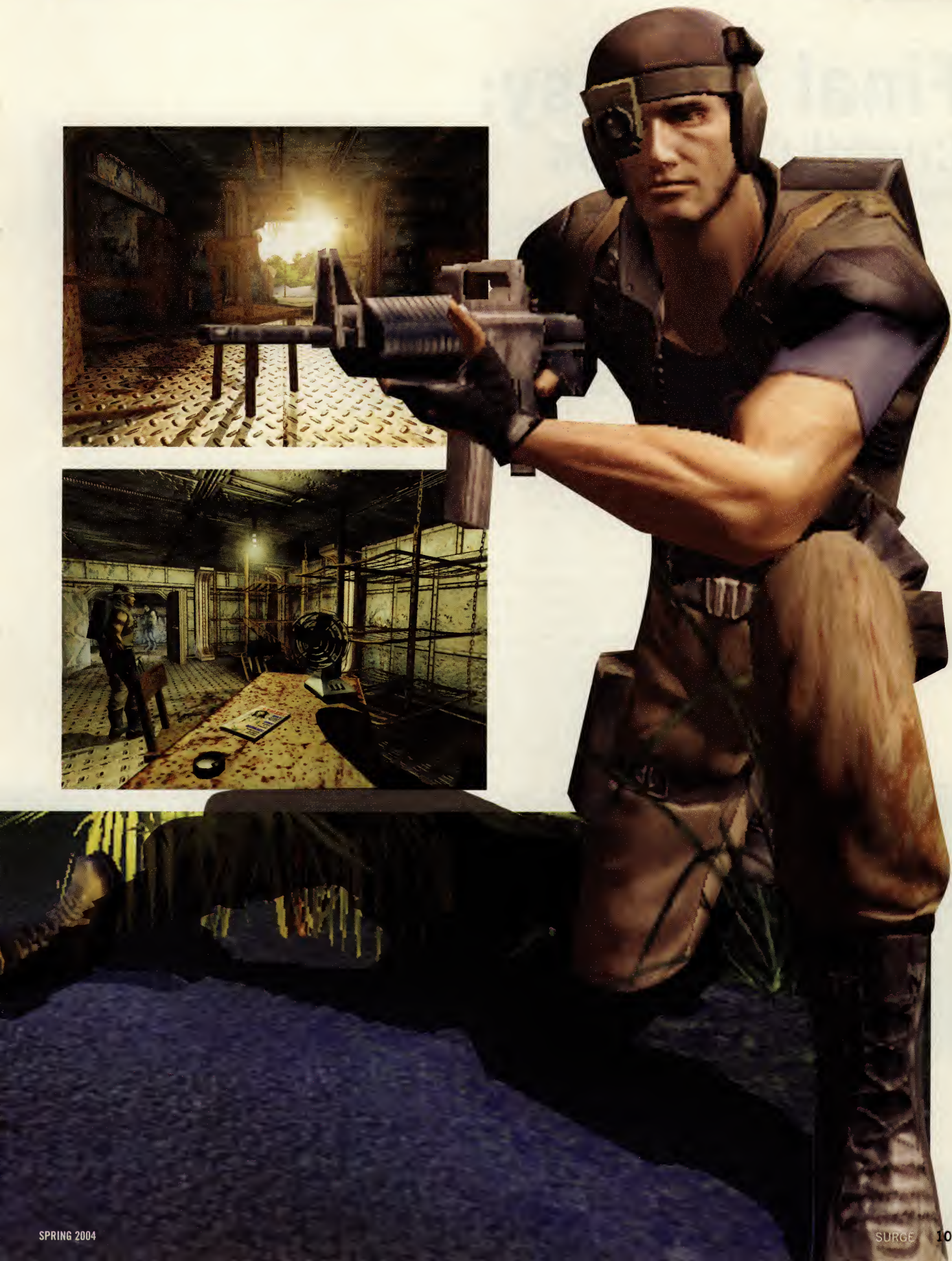
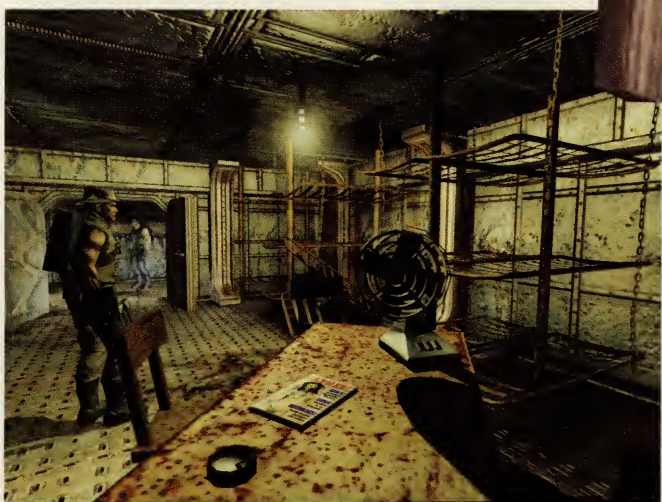
Think of *Far Cry* as the basic deathmatch shooter taken to a logical and impressive extreme. The tech requirements aren't light, but this shooter is quite a treat, with refined skill challenges (like sniping wildlife), and enough multiplayer madness to shelve *Unreal Tournament*. Check your need for an impressive storyline, grab a gun, and hit the beach.

—RF



Rating
8
10





Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles

The first Fantasy for GameCube

Publisher Nintendo | Developer Square Enix | Genre Action RPG | ESRB T | Format GC

Square returns to a Nintendo console after an eight-year absence with *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles*, but the return includes an asterisk. *Chronicles* is no heir to Square's *FF I-X2*—no turn-based, overscripted, cut-scene-stuffed, 60-hour epic. However, it is an official *FF* game, replete with the wonderful character design, lush settings, and frequent use of Moogles. Just prepare yourself for an 18-hour, multiplayer-centric, *Gauntlet*-esque action-RPG.

Crystal Chronicles takes place in a poison-covered, monster-infested world that up to four players set about cleansing as part of a crusading caravan. You'll visit beautiful towns and docks, but for most of the game you'll crawl through dungeons, a routine you're used to by now. Best enjoyed as a multiplayer experience, the game requires each player to have a Game Boy Advance and link cable (used to manage items and goose Nintendo hardware sales). The gimmick allows your character to go into an auto-follow mode on the TV while you manipulate menus on the handheld. The friendless and GBA-less can take heart: Multiplayer quests can be switched to a GameCube-controller-based solo mode at any time. But the combat—especially the epic boss



battles—works best when there's a friend with whom to coordinate attacks, combine magic, and share blame for any ignominious defeats.

No matter how you play, you will experience a game rife with decent, but not revolutionary, ideas. The controllable characters have families and professions, and they meet other colorful caravans. All the while, game time progresses in years, affecting routes on the overworld. These concepts are underdeveloped. Characters barely change from year to year, and interaction between most of them is limited.

Despite the complicated entrance barrier, *Crystal Chronicles*' overall design is simple. You'll want to rent this one before investing in its beautiful but basic gameplay.

—ST

Rating
7
10

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Final Fantasy XI Online

Better than EverQuest? Oh, yes

Publisher Square Enix | Developer Square Enix | Genre MMORPG | ESRB T | Format PC, PS2



Square Enix's MMORPG, already up and running for a year and a half in Japan, has finally come to the States, and it manages the impossible: It takes the online RPG experience, increasingly mired in repetitive gameplay mechanics and Middle-earthian game-worlds, and makes it seem new and exciting again.

XI Online's unique, distinctly Japanese audiovisual artistry immediately strikes you. Every aspect of the game, from the installation screens to the game-world of Vana'diel itself, is drop-dead gorgeous. And because *XI Online* has already gone through its growing pains overseas, you won't have to suffer through the bugs and glitches that have plagued every previous MMORPG launch; the game runs smoothly whether you have a modest PC or a tricked-out rig.

The game focuses on combat, and unlike other MMORPGs, you can actually tell when you're

hitting something, so the experience is much more satisfying. There are more than a dozen character classes, which provide plenty of variety in every adventuring party and in every game session. You even can change classes at any time without penalty to keep things fresh for yourself.

Square Enix has done an excellent job of providing new *XI Online* content at regular intervals, and it's already working on player-vs-player combat, which we don't miss at all (it's a joy to play an MMORPG without it). You now have the ability to invite other characters into your private room, which can be decorated with the gewgaws you accumulate during your explorations.

This title's problems—an unusually steep learning curve, an epic installation process, and plenty of buffed-out Japanese players enjoying their 18-month head start—are mild compared to the flat-out broken gameplay of *Star Wars Galaxies*.

—ZM

Rating
8
10

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Jungle Storm

Recon takes a step backward

Publisher Ubisoft | Developer Ubisoft | Genre FPS | ESRB T | Format PS2



By now, most gamers are familiar with the Ghosts, the elite military commandos who infiltrate modern day hotspots using stealth and the latest high-tech weapons. *Jungle Storm*, the latest installment for the PS2, is packed with levels from *Island Thunder* and *Desert Siege* and includes an exclusive new single-

player campaign set in the lush Colombian jungle.

Gameplay focuses on realistic stealth combat with two squads: Team Alpha and Team Bravo. Before entering an area, you'll be able to equip each soldier in your company with a primary and secondary weapon, a miscellaneous item, and grenades.

Strategy comes into play here, as you'll need a full arsenal at your disposal once you're in the thick of the jungle. As is the case in any Tom Clancy-branded game, the weapons are authentic, and your tactics are key. This isn't run-and-gun arcade gaming; it's think-before-you-shoot, hide-to-outwit-the-enemy combat.

A tactical map offers the names, current health, and equipped weapons for each member of the two squads, with Team Alpha on the left side of the screen and Team Bravo on the right. Once you've deployed your teams to the chosen drop point, a new

"eye" icon shows you how well hidden your squads are. Ubisoft has modified the original radar, which pinpointed the exact location of enemy targets, to introduce an element of surprise.

Controlling your troops is still a chore. Soldiers get bogged down in the environment too often, literally bumping into trees. Don't expect your boys to bail you out in sticky situations, either.

The meat of this game comes in the form of its online modes, which include innovative games like Hamburger Hill (two teams attempt to hold their ground on a central location) and Mouse Hunt (a variation of tag in which the hunter becomes the hunted). You can also work your way through the missions and online maps cooperatively.

While falling short of the reigning online PS2 military FPS king, *SOCOM II*, *Jungle Storm* marks an improvement over the first PS2 offering. Xbox owners will want to stick with their much-better renditions (due to the excellent graphics and gameplay), even though they don't include the exclusive level.

—JG



Rating **5**
10

James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing

Bond is back in the driver's seat

Publisher EA | Developer EA Games | Genre Action/Adventure | ESRB T | Format GC, PS2, Xbox



You would have to be quite the picker of nits to consider the James Bond game series tepid or flat. After all, it has been one of the most widely enjoyed titles of the past decade. But, once you play EA's latest Bond fare, *007: Everything or Nothing*, all of your other tuxedos will seem short in the crotch, and your vodka martinis will seem rank. Tweaking the Bond formula, EA has compiled the necessary accoutrements from the films to create what is arguably one of the best Bond games.

Everything here is overwhelmingly cinematic, like, well, the cinematics. With the THX sound and fluid motion, they are some of the best we've seen. To complete the cinematic feel, the game features the likeness and voice of Pierce Brosnan and the vocal talents of Willem Dafoe, Judi Dench, John Cleese, Shannon Elizabeth, and Heidi Klum. Pop star Mya contributes an original theme song, and

even the load screen's sexy female silhouettes are riveting.

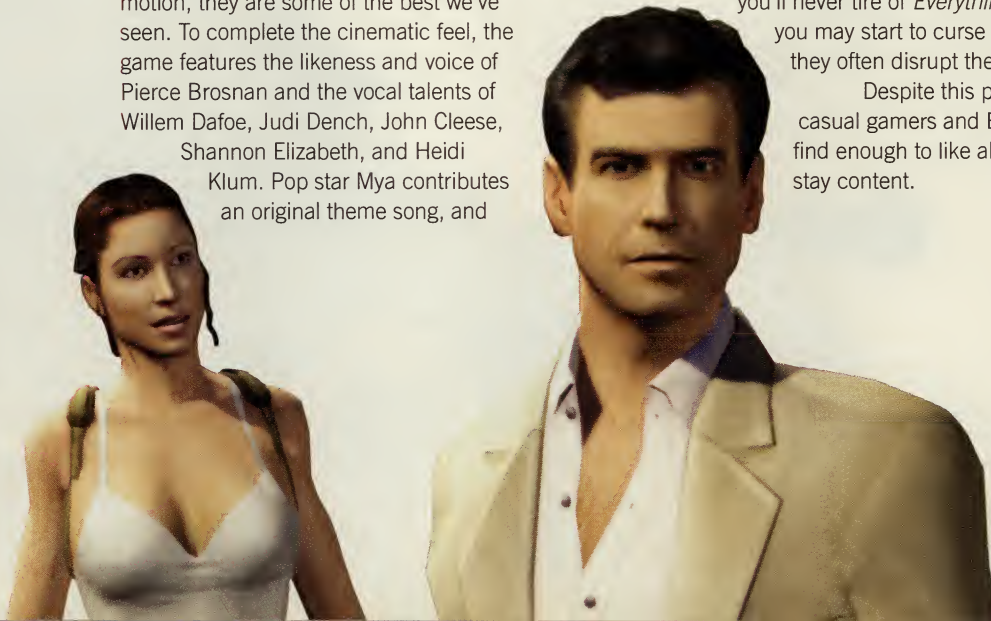
You can practically gorge yourself on badass spyware, including coin grenades and spider bombs that you navigate prior to detonation and rappel guns that help you scale walls. The amazing array of vehicles at your disposal makes for great driving sequences.

The large set of missions would be right at home in the latest Bond flick, as would this title's story—nano-technology falling into the wrong hands. The good mix of hand-to-hand and armed-combat moves ensures you'll never tire of *Everything or Nothing*, but you may start to curse the cut scenes, as they often disrupt the adrenaline flow.

Despite this petty complaint, casual gamers and Bond aficionados will find enough to like about this game to stay content.

—Tal Pinchevsky

Rating
8
10



Maximo vs Army of Zin

Zin-fully good platformer

Publisher **Capcom** | Developer **Capcom** | Genre **Action** | ESRB **T** | Format **PS2**

Maximo: Ghosts to Glory (2002) was a glorious reimagining of Capcom's classic *Ghosts 'N Goblins* series that combined the stellar game design of David Siller, the mastermind behind *Crash Bandicoot*, and the gorgeous art design of Susumu Matsushita.

Army of Zin brings back only Matsushita, and Siller's absence is noticeable to any fan of the original for two obvious reasons. First, *Army of Zin* poses less of a challenge than the sadistic *Ghosts to Glory*, an unapologetic throwback to the merciless days of old-school gaming. (Siller also designed *Aero the Acro-Bat*, one of the hardest 16-bit games ever made; the man obviously likes to make people cry.)

Second, while *Ghosts to Glory* focuses on platforming, *Army of Zin* targets combat; it includes the kind of combo counter introduced in *Devil May Cry*, which umpteen imitators have since run into the

ground. The combat itself isn't any more complicated; *Maximo* presents more attack types than before, but they're all easy to execute.

Amazingly, neither of these radical changes harms the gameplay; they just make *Zin* more accessible to the masses. The charming visual style, the sweet orchestral score, and the butter-smooth movement of the original game remain entirely intact here. The plethora of cunningly stashed secrets gives *Zin* much more replay value than a typical platformer, and its camera requires little attention, a refreshing change in an era when many games force the player to focus on cinematography as much as gameplay.

Maximo vs Army of Zin is filled with personality, charm, and loads of playability; what all too many platformers want, this game's got.

—ZM



Rating
8
10

Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes

Remaking a classic game

Publisher Konami | Developer Konami and Silicon Knights | Genre Stealth Action | ESRB M | Format GC

Released six years after the original *Metal Gear Solid* and improving upon nearly every impressive feature in an already classic game, *Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes* proves to be one of the best remakes you can experience in any medium. We're not convinced the world needs another *King Kong* movie (we're talking to you, Peter Jackson), but if developers are going to polish past videogame greats the way Konami's Hideo Kojima and Nintendo second-party Silicon Knights have updated the first *MGS*, then bring on the retreads.

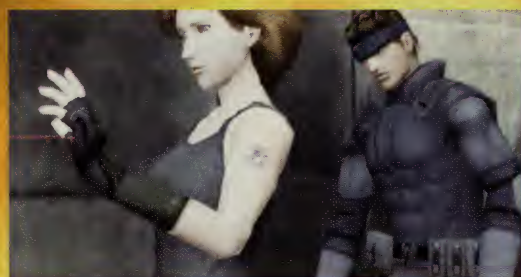
The GameCube remake presents the same gripping adventure as the original PlayStation *Metal Gear Solid*. Solid Snake must infiltrate a heavily fortified Alaskan terrorist stronghold, relying mostly on stealth. The slightly tweaked level design accommodates some new *MGS2*-inspired moves, like the ability to shoot in first-person view and stuff enemies in lockers (more useful than it sounds). Nintendo first-timers will enjoy a new "very easy" difficulty setting, and veterans will note a host of hidden nods to Mario and friends.

The game's presentation commands your attention. The redone score and voice acting produce epic results and the graphics are beautifully rendered, with light and shadow effects galore—a far cry from the jagged, people-made-of-Legos look of the original. Cut-scenes have been stylishly redirected, with the addition of swooping camera tricks, added action, and an overall improvement in visual flair that recalls the best

moments of movies like *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*.

The remake is a no-brainer for newcomers, but will seasoned *MGS* fans want this game? Think of *Twin Snakes* as the DVD release of that favorite movie you only have on grainy VHS. It's time to upgrade.

—ST



Rating
9
10

MX Unleashed

Dude, let's do some whippits and jump our bikes off dirt hills!

Publisher THQ | Developer Rainbow Studios | Genre Racing | ESRB E | Format PS2, Xbox



Rainbow Studios wowed many gamers with *ATV Offroad Fury 2* on the PlayStation 2, and now, with *MX Unleashed*, the studio gives the oft-neglected bike-racing genre a nitrous-oxide boost.

MX Unleashed is fully loaded with racing options, including a career mode, supercross series, nationals, free ride, and freestyle mode. If you work your way through it, you'll have access to over 40 tracks and environments.

Beyond your standard bike-on-bike races, you can race against a variety of different vehicles—from monster and trophy trucks to biplanes and

helicopters—in the machine race mode. Sounds easy enough, but winning the races is harder than it appears, as each vehicle has its strengths and weaknesses.

In career mode, you have to dust off all of your big-time motocross skills to win races and unlock different vehicles. In clutch mode, you can power in and out of corners, creating a realistic racing feel. If you don't have the skills to win the races outright, you can earn enough points to buy them in the store (assuming you have a couple of weekends free to rack up the points).

Like other Rainbow games, much of the fun lies in exploring the huge open spaces and performing sick tricks in freestyle mode. You jump your bike over farmhouses and hurl yourself off the back of a transport truck on the open road for big air. All the while, the incredibly detailed physics engine makes this title entertaining enough to satisfy die-hard bikers and casual gamers alike.

MX Unleashed injects a high-octane shot of adrenaline for racing gamers and may be the most entertaining motocross game this side of *Excitebike 64*.

—TM



Rating **7**
10

NBA Ballers

It's all about the Benjamins

Publisher Midway | Developer Midway | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format PS2, Xbox



Like retro NBA jerseys, *NBA Ballers*, a one-on-one take of NBA action, is a throwback to the early days of hardwood gaming, but with a modern-day twist.

While the one-on-one concept is well established in b-ball games, it's never sported the bling-bling that Midway pumps into this title. Treading beyond the on-court action, *Ballers* brings NBA fans into the diamond-encrusted world of multimillionaire players. From luxury yachts to outrageous mansions to private island compounds, players lace up the shoes of the richest NBA stars on the planet: Tim Duncan, Kevin Garnett, and Jason Kidd, to name a few. Think of it as *MTV Cribs* meets *NBA Jam*.

Choose from 60 current NBA "playas" (from Kobe Bryant to Allen Iverson) and 24 legends (including Dr. J, Larry Bird, Isaiah Thomas, Bill Russell, and Dominique Wilkins). Thanks to the one-on-one half-court battles, *Ballers* sports the most realistic player models of any sports game. The players look as close as next-generation consoles can get to the real thing—especially their faces. The game leaves plenty of processing power for the lush environments and exotic locales where the courts are located.

Although one-on-one gameplay might seem limiting, the assortment of individual offensive and defensive moves and counter moves gives *Ballers* game. Each player has his own characteristic style of offensive and defensive play. When sparring against a newbie, you can take Ben Wallace, a master of defense who's not known for shooting, and go up against an offensive threat like Iverson or Bryant. The best-of-three-rounnds format separates the experience from arcade-style games like EA's *NBA Street*.



In addition to the excellent two-player mode, which has online capability on PS2, the heart of this game is its Career mode. You start off in the streets, playing pick-up ball, and join the cast of a reality TV series called *NBA Ballers*, which gives you the chance to become the best player in the world. As you win games, you make money and can buy street gear, Cadillac Escalades, mansions, yachts, and helicopters. The purpose of this mode, beyond winning the games, is to live it up and flaunt your wealth.

While *NBA Ballers* lacks the depth of a top basketball sim like *ESPN NBA Basketball 2K4* or a top arcade franchise like *NBA Street*, it brings the bling-bling factor, excellent graphics, and online game to the court. Die-hard hoops fans will buy any good NBA-themed videogame, but *NBA Ballers* may not reach beyond this hardcore market.

—JG



Rating
7
10

116 SURGE



SPRING 2004

NFL Street

Making backyard football cool again

Publisher EA | Developer EA | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format GC, PS2, Xbox

After failing in the arcade sports arena with *NHL Rock the Rink* a few years ago, EA has produced two solid hits with its *NBA Street* games. Taking a page from that playbook, *NFL Street* offers all 32 NFL teams and a roster of over 300 NFL players, both current (Ricky Williams) and legendary (Barry Sanders). Since each player you pick for your roster plays both offense and defense, it's important to choose wisely, whether you're selecting from the 10 to 12 available team members for normal or season play or the 40 randomly chosen pool of players available for pick-up games. Strategy comes into play in the dual roles of the players, so you'll want a big, versatile QB like Donovan McNabb or Michael Vick to be able to handle the defensive duties.

The graphics nicely mix arcade exaggerations with lifelike detail. Rather than sporting official uniforms, the pick-up players wear an assortment of equipment and team-licensed apparel, but no helmets (to emphasize the facial animation). If you grow tired of the players provided, you can create your own players from a multitude of options, building a powerhouse team with upgradable attributes.

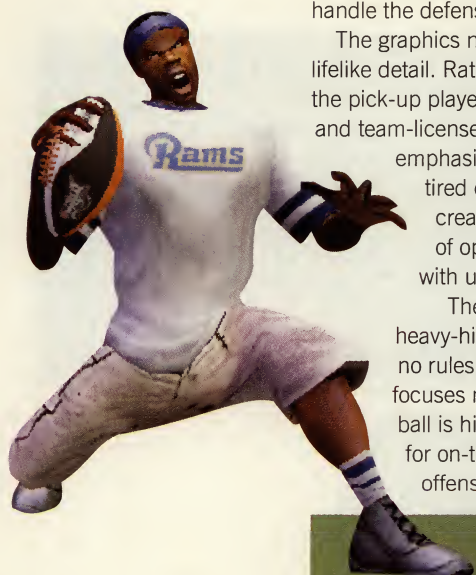
The game offers lots of jukes and heavy-hitting tackles. There are no referees, no rules, and no holds barred. Gameplay focuses more on what happens after the ball is hiked, and you'll find plenty of room for on-the-field improvisation within the 32 offensive and 16 defensive plays. You can

toss the ball at any time in the game and execute halfback passes, double reverses, and other trick plays. There are no field goals or point-after kicks, but *NFL Street* is all about scoring, so two-point conversions are required.

The action takes place on one of seven fields, including EA's Redwood Shores headquarters. You'll play pick-up games on a beach and other locales and earn points for innovative on-field action and "showboating" taunts (which also earn you style points that can be used to purchase upgrades). Like *NBA Street*, this title's GameBreaker meter lets you build up momentum; hit the button before the snap, and your offense or defense becomes virtually unstoppable as it enters "the zone." The PS2 version will support exclusive online gameplay, as well.

Madden fans now have an alternative to plug into during the NFL's long off-season. Like *NFL Blitz* in its early days, *NFL Street* may hook arcade-oriented pigskin addicts. With the Super Bowl a memory, the football season just got longer—and faster.

—JG



Rating **7**
10

Nightshade

Shinobi's side story

Publisher Sega of America | Developer SEGA WOW | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PS2



Last year, Sega's update of the *Shinobi* franchise wowed players with next-generation graphics and complex combo moves, but that critically acclaimed title might get lost in the long, red-ribbon trails of Hotsuma's uniform, thanks to *Nightshade*, a side story to the last outing, led by a new heroine.

Hibana, a kunoichi (female ninja), is out to stop further efforts by the evil Hiruko, the same villain who caused Hotsuma endless grief in *Shinobi*. In order to take the villain down, Hibana ventures to locations all around Tokyo, fighting on rooftops, at construction sites, and in industrial factories (where the most dubious of dealings go down). She faces a few more exciting challenges, like speeding down the highway and jumping from one 18-wheeler to the next in a fight right out of *The Matrix Reloaded*.

As is the case for most female heroines these days, Hibana's formfitting uniform leaves little to the imagination. While the trademark red scarf worn by Hotsuma is not part of her attire, *Nightshade* incorporates red trails into the action to lend the game a fast-paced feeling. The blurred red lines following Hibana must be an effect of running so fast in her hot red boots. The result is not lost on the gameplay or on the player, who no doubt will be entranced by the trails.

Nightshade has the action-and-adventure feel that a mature title should, and its speed and death-defying stunts show the influence of some of the recent *Sonic* titles, where the crew races through

courses at breakneck speeds. In addition to the fast-paced action, *Nightshade* packs in an improved "Tate" system, allowing numerous combat moves and impressive maneuvering while encountering the endless henchmen sent by Hiruko. The battles recall the glory days of 8-bit, as waves of enemies appear out of thin air, and you must dispatch of them before you move on. Innovative? No. Fun? For a while.

Nightshade's premise isn't original, but it captures the classic elements of the *Shinobi* series while adding the allure of a female heroine leading a daring adventure. Unfortunately, this can't help overcome the repetitive nature of the fight sequences after an hour or so of gameplay.

—Enid Burns



Rating
6
10

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Ninja Gaiden

Ninjas are cool, by cool, we mean totally sweet

Publisher Tecmo | Developer Team Ninja | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format Xbox



If you were a kid in the 1980s, you might remember the ninja explosion that lasted from the late part of that decade right up until 1993. For the NES, the centerpiece of that craze was *Ninja Gaiden*. Following a long absence and a few cameos in

the *DOA* series, its hero, Ryu Hayabusa, is back. While the revamped *Ninja Gaiden* won't likely spark another ninja craze, its latest model lives up to the lofty expectations.

The original game debuted in 1988, offering rich, challenging gameplay. The new *Ninja Gaiden* sticks to that addictive formula, becoming arguably the best *Gaiden* yet. The premise is almost identical to the original, as renegade ninjas attack Ryu's village and steal the Dark Dragon Blade. With his ancestors' Dragon Sword in hand, the young grasshopper ventures off with revenge in his heart. From there, you'll travel through visually stunning environments, combating an impressive variety of kung fu fighters and occult figures.

As beautiful as the game looks, its true appeal lies where all games' should: gameplay. The highly intuitive controls and great range of moves make for the most exciting action we've seen in years. Add to that the awesome cinematics and the new moves and skills you'll acquire throughout, and you're dealing with an action title of epic proportions. The basic controls and visuals are enough to suck you in, but the more you play, the more you'll be able to harness Ryu as a serious weapon. Call it *Tony Hawk's Pro Ninja*.

—TP



Rating
9
10

[illegible]

Playing online will cost about \$10 a month (free if you already subscribe to *PSO I & II*). The gameplay system will overwhelm you at first. Stick with it, and you'll discover a thinking-gamer's game, one that will consume you and likely remind you of a galaxy far, far away.

As addictive as a deep bag of chips, *PSO III*'s

—ST



Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword

Somewhere over the rainbow...

Publisher Ubisoft | Developer Ubisoft Milan | Genre FPS | ESRB M | Format PC

The expansion pack is probably the most reviled publishing tactic in gaming, often with good reason; it's not easy to convince players that they aren't paying twice for the same release. But Ubisoft has good reason to revisit the success of *Rainbow Six 3*. After all, a lot of time has passed since the last major *R6* release, and this new batch of solid content argues strongly in favor of jumping back into the Tom Clancy universe.

For solo players, eight new missions and a handful of new weapons form a Mediterranean campaign. Overall, this is a continuation of the formula that has kept the series alive for years. The most interesting addition is the countdown mode, which could become an *R6* favorite. It levies a time limit for each level, forcing you to take a hair-trigger, action-movie approach to the typically tactical play. The levels balance out to take advantage of the scenario, and civilian and NPC police characters have been added to heighten the tension.

The multiplayer game bears more improvement, with great changes to the initially buggy connectivity code. Two new play modes called Kamikaze and Capture



the Enemy stand out. In the former, a member of one team is strapped to a bomb; teammates have to find the defusing gear while protecting his life against the opposition's efforts to blow everything to hell. Capture the Enemy is more interesting, as it features nonlethal shots. Shot players surrender, after which enemies have a short time to reach and handcuff them. Teams have to keep their members free and on the offensive; it's a pressure-filled—and welcome—expansion of stale deathmatch play.

There's not quite enough in this release to make it an essential buy, but longtime fans will be happy to get another fast *R6* fix.

—RF

Rating
7
10

Rise to Honor

Box office bomb

Publisher SCEA | Developer SCEA | Genre Action | ESRB T | Format PS2



If you want to create the videogame equivalent of a classic martial-arts action film, you could do much worse than bringing in Chinese fighter/actor Jet Li (*Lethal Weapon 4*, *Romeo Must Die*) and combat choreographer Cory Yuen as collaborators. Indeed, that's what Sony has done with its unique *Rise to Honor*.

While it sounds good in theory, the restrictive gameplay and poorly designed control scheme contribute to a far less entertaining game than this title should be.

Rise to Honor plays out like a movie, with the gameplay neatly woven into a story that reveals itself through in-engine cut scenes. It's up to you to navigate Li through countless baddies and other hazards using the left analog stick for direction. While the battle sequences are free roaming (at least, within a defined combat area), most of the action follows a tight, linear path; it may not be "on rails," but it plays pretty close. For instance, at one point a helicopter is firing on Li as he runs over scaffolds and platforms. If he doesn't jump at the right moment, or if he takes a dead end, it's curtains—and a return to the starting point to do it again, until you've determined, memorized, and navigated the right path without even the slightest error.



Head-to-head combat comes in the form of varied martial arts moves. These are pleasingly animated through motion capture, but they grow repetitive quickly. You can't exact control over the specific moves at any given time; slapping the right stick in the direction of the adversary launches Li into a single offensive attack, and quick multiples can chain attacks into combos. The two-stick control mechanism enables moving in one direction while throwing attacks in another, but trying to keep up with a steady flow of attackers, or even one deft boss, is less effective and downright tiresome.

Rise to Honor should have been a stylish game with a deep story that puts the gamer in the enviable position of "directing" Jet Li through an interactive action movie. Instead, it offers a tedious exercise in run/die/repeat gameplay and extreme control-pad aerobics.

—Andy Eddy



Rating **2**
10



Samurai Jack: The Shadow of Aku

Jack of all trades, sensei of none

Publisher Sega | Developer Adrenium | Genre Action | ESRB T | Format GC, PS2, Xbox



Genddy Tartakovsky's *Samurai Jack* deconstructed the anime genre without actually being anime, and it riled up millions of cartoonheads. Naturally, Sega came along and branded it for console release.

The game borrows a number of endearing aspects from the Cartoon Network series, most notably the incredible visuals and vibrant aesthetics. Lush and slick, the game does little to dispel Jack's supercool Zen mystique. (He speaks rarely, muttering "sushi" after you replenish his nutrition.)

As Jack, an ancient samurai trapped in a parallel dimension, you must save a group of pacifistic locals from the tyrannical reign of your arch nemesis, Aku, who resembles a Chinese New Year float. With a variety of primitive weapons and some patented moves, you must collect relics and save the reptilian villagers to defeat your enemy and eventually make your way home.

The character renderings are a little cubic, and the environments, though stunning, aren't particularly sprawling. The action becomes stale at times, but it forces you to explore your colorful surroundings. Your Zen meter applies a sort of samurai bullet time, helping you annihilate assorted Aku minions.

Unless you're a huge fan of the series, though, you might be disappointed. If you're expecting something other than a brightly exaggerated *Shinobi*, you're probably rolling up the wrong tuna roll in *Samurai Jack*. Jackheads, on the other hand, should enjoy the stop-and-go action as much as the fun visuals.

—TP



Rating
6
10



Sonic Heroes

He's still fast. And fun

Publisher Sega | Developer Sonic Team | Genre Action/Adventure | ESRB E | Format GC, PS2, Xbox

While the dictionary defines “sonic” mostly in terms of audible sounds, the word also applies to moving at or faster than 760 miles per hour—the speed of sound. Certainly, as a videogame franchise, Sega’s *Sonic the Hedgehog* has enough speed and fast-paced action to fit that description.

The latest title in the series, *Sonic Heroes*, holds common ground with its predecessors, from the so-fast-it-blurs gameplay to the brightly colored scenes and characters. It adds an interesting team mechanic: You play as a three-character team made up of one “Speed” character, one “Power” character, and one “Fly” character. You choose from four available teams, with Team Sonic consisting of the familiar Sonic, Knuckles, and Tails.

Each level is broken up into sections, and each segment requires each character’s abilities (a display usually indicates which characteristic is best for the situation). With a button push, you toggle through the threesome, so one of them is the team’s leader. On some occasions, usually when the team is zooming through a speedy gauntlet, you’ll encounter special gates where the leader is automatically set for the situation.

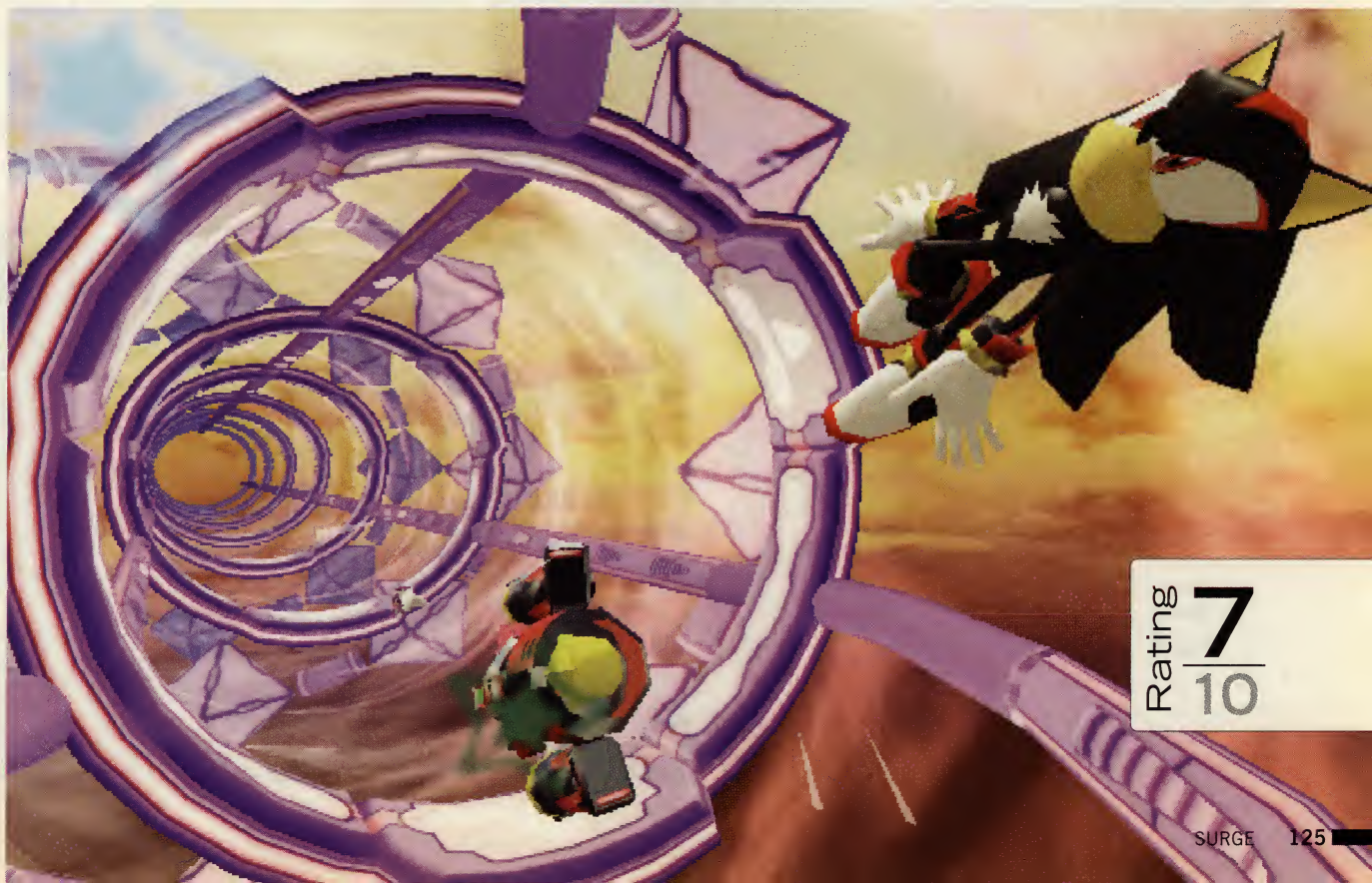
Beyond the game’s unique concept, it offers



traditional platform fun with speed-up pads, one-ups, a wild selection of enemies, assorted gadgetry, and the default *Sonic* currency, rings. It’s a large 3D world, with loops, platforms, ramps, curves, and water. Replay value is high, as you can take multiple paths to each goal and try to improve on your best time.

A few annoying glitches hinder gameplay, such as the less-than-optimum camera views and objects that sometimes deviate from their standard behavior (i.e., rings you can’t pick up). While the game is a little on the short side, *Sonic Heroes* provides entertaining, all-ages gameplay. It might be worth renting before buying, to ensure that it’s for you.

—AE



Rating **7**
10

Spellforce

The Order of Dawn

Beware the hybrid

Publisher JoWood/Encore | Developer Phenomic | Genre RPG/RTS | ESRB T | Format PC



Hybrid games are hit and miss because they often amount to less than the sum of their parts. Case in point: *Spellforce*, which tries to combine the best features of role-playing and real-time-strategy games.

In *Spellforce*, you play a rune warrior knight who

resides in an enchanted chunk of stone until the magician Rohen brings him back to life. Apparently, not everyone got along back in the day; the world was shattered when some really powerful mages decided to settle matters steel-cage match style. The aftermath? A fragmented world of islands connected only by magic portals and threatened by—who else?—the forces of evil.

The game plays out in a series of maps, as you travel from island to island facing off against said forces. You cruise around doing your RPG thing: completing quests, gaining experience to fight monsters, and customizing your character's abilities. On many maps, you'll encounter monuments that allow you to summon workers of varied races. You can use these drones to build structures and to ultimately raise an army. Enter real-time strategy stage left.

Neither the role-playing nor the strategy elements are executed well here. In fact, they'll draw yawns from gamers who've played the best these respective genres have to offer; the FedEx-style quests and simple horde tactics used in strategy battles don't cut it anymore. While *Spellforce* could serve as a temporary diversion on a rainy day (provided the price is right), RPG and RTS fans would be better served by a game that does one genre well, rather than two genres half-heartedly.

—Adam Fleet



Rating
5
10



World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International

The advanced soccer game

Publisher Konami | Developer KCET | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format PS2



The soccer gods seem intent on restricting the best soccer game to our imagination, instead of our consoles. While EA's *FIFA Soccer 2004* boasts team licenses and the best graphics and commentary, Konami's *Winning Eleven 7* offers the best play experience.

Like last year's effort, the game has a steep learning curve, but if you invest the time, the rewards are great. With improved physics, players realistically handle and react to the ball. From long-range passes, to shooting on net, to defending against an opposing player, every action in this virtual field feels right. The AI is improved, and the realistic ball physics encourage you to focus on special moves like dekes and bicycle kicks.

Winning Eleven 7 has taken a huge step forward. Check out the realistic facial expressions (irate goalkeepers get pissed at defenders who aren't doing their jobs) and the variety of goal scoring celebrations; the motion-capture work is excellent.

Sims fans will gravitate toward the Master League, where every aspect of the game is customizable (assuming you can work your way through the



poor menu layouts). This year, you can earn points through exhibition games and training camps and buy stadiums, teams, players, and even hairstyles.

The lack of real clubs and players is likely to upset the game's target audience, die-hard soccer fans. Konami has included 56 national teams with updated rosters though, for international competition.

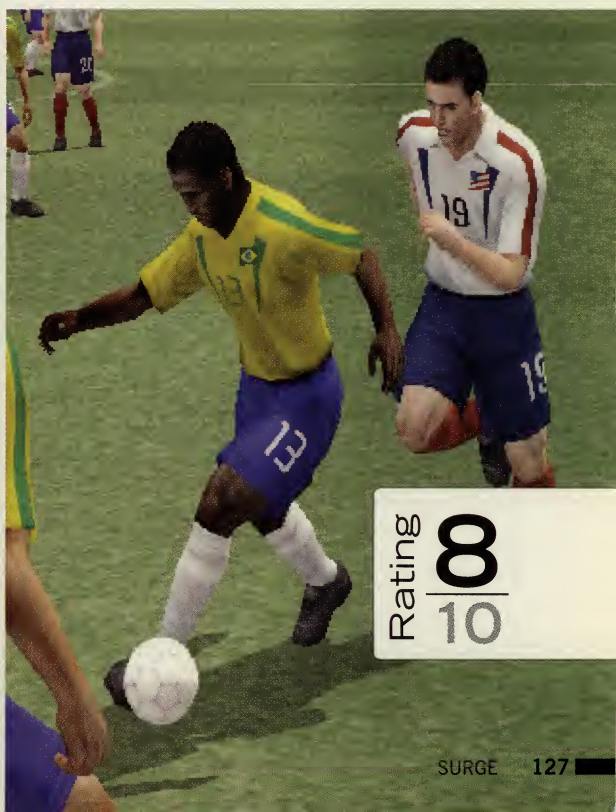
The audio is lacking, too. The techno music gets old fast, and the commentators, Peter Brackley and Trevor Brookings, are incredibly bland. It's not a tragedy that this game doesn't support surround sound, since it's best played on mute while listening to your own music.

If soccer fans can get past the lack of clubs, poor soundtrack, and lack of an online mode, they will enjoy *Winning Eleven 7*'s amazing gameplay.

—JG



SPRING 2004



Rating **8**
10

ILL SKILLS

When he's not behind a mic dropping rhymes or a soundboard scoring blockbuster films, RZA, a.k.a. Bobby Digital, can be found behind a game controller.

Do you play games?

Guaranteed, you know that. I got both Xbox and PS2. We take 'em out on tour. I'm a gamehead, yo.

What are your favorites?

For sports, *NBA Street* is the way to go. You build your own team up, and my team can beat any—except for my brother, he's got an ill team. And I love all the fighting games. The illiest one they got right now is *Soul Caliber II*—that one's hot—*Mortal Kombat*, of course. I like the guy with the snake-and-crane style. The crane kick's crazy.

What about old games, like your favorites from back in the day?

When Activision made *MegaMania*...we used to skip school playing that one. And the Atari 2600, when they had games like *Kaboom!*. That's one thing I like about the new systems: You can buy the Midway collection, you can buy the Atari collection—I got all those. On my Xbox right now I got *KLAX* and *Defender*. On my Game Boy Advance I got *Dig Dug* and *Centipede*.

Have you ever thought about doing the soundtrack for a videogame?

Oh yeah, definitely, that's something I've been looking to do—a lot of hip-hop guys are doing it anyway. People have been doing a great job, but I'd go crazy with it. You know, like in the old games, you can't even tell what the hell was going on.

What about a *Kill Bill* game, has there been any plan to do that?

Oh, that would be great. Me and Quentin [Tarantino] were talking about that the other day. O-Ren Ishii's life story could be like a *Tomb Raider*-type game. In *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*, you start seeing a character called Bud—he'd be like [Tommy] from *Grand Theft Auto*...and that's about all I'm giving you [about *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*] right there.

Who'd win in a fight—Ol' Dirty Bastard or Yoda? Like if you gave Ol' Dirty a lightsaber.

Oh, that's a good fight you called up...I'd have to go with Ol' Dirty...his whole energy is just crazy.

What about your future projects?

I'm working on the score for *Soul Plane*...it's got Snoop Dogg and Method Man. I'm also rapping and producing for the *Barbershop 2* soundtrack.

Can you tell us more about it?

You ever seen *Airplane!?* This is *Sooooouul Plane*.

Nice.

—David Crohn



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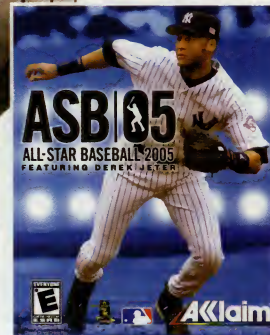
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